

# Risk and Trivial Pursuit

Lately, our business has generally tended to play it safe in the audio arena.

I expect that phrase, “play it safe,” to stab like a sharp wooden stake into the hearts of the “Bad Boy” game developers. Like a long nail. Maybe nine inches. And well it should, too.

We gamers are nasty, rough, and evil. We’re about blood, speed, adrenaline, breaking the law, killing the monster, and getting the girl.

But we’re scientists at heart, aren’t we? And we really, *really* would like to be filmmakers, some of us older guys, wouldn’t we, really? C’mon, admit it. At least we long for the legitimacy that filmmakers have. I can tell that we like legitimacy, because when we get little pieces of it, we throw off our bloodied helmets, leap to the top of the mountain, circle our splintered clubs over our heads, and roar victoriously to the sky.

**“Our industry makes more money than film and television combined!!!”**

**“Our ads are on TEE VEEEE!”**

**“We used a full orchestra on our game!”**

**“I can’t believe I used some of the very same extras Steven Spielberg used!!!”**

Guys, these are impressive achievements, but they are not things that seasoned, confident film people, or barbarian warriors for that matter, say. These are things that scared insecure people say when they want their dad to like them.

You want to be compared to Movies? Okay, try this. Once upon a time, the film industry was in that position, too.

Legitimacy was a thing of the future. Working in The Cinema was considered to be not unlike working in The Pornography. “Moving Pictures” were a haven for desperate actors and broke entrepreneurs, and for many of these, it was *precisely* not unlike working in The Pornography. Known stage actors who were reduced to the level of working in film would often

deny it, using a different name for the two endeavors. It was common to hear that an actor was working in film “only until something legitimate comes along.”

In this way, we are like The Cinema. Shout *that* from the mountaintop.

And in our striving to become more and more cinematic, we have taken some of our attention from gameplay and focused it upon some of the outstanding aspects of that noble, flat, tall, and two-hour-long medium. Not “outstanding” as in wonderful. **“Outstanding”** as in like a **sore thumb**.

Black screen with white letters.

A low, throbbing single note builds in intensity.

A deep voice begins speaking, “In a World...”

A scraping, screeching sound effect makes us leap from our seats.

The orchestral score hits really hard!

The car drives really fast.

The Chick is HOT, and man, she says sassy things, and it turns out she can FIGHT, TOO!

The gun points in the guy’s face.

The computer-generated alien’s jaws open. Look! See how well they can render DROOL now!

Sudden silence...

A drop of blood lands on a white wedding veil.

The screen explodes, and all is quiet. The deep voice is back.

“Kiss-Kiss, Bang-Bang.”

“Coming this summer.”

“From We Know How to Make Trailers so that Somebody Off-Screen Can Make a Pile of Cash Films.”

This is the sum total of what we have picked up from decades of the cinematic art.

There is more to movies than kiss-kiss, bang-bang. There is emotion. There is depth. There is social change and the responsibility that goes with causing that change.

There is the fact that people have given their lives to the medium.

There is innovation—the kind that can only come from risk. And the kind of innovation we see in the great movies is the kind that can come only when many people have given their entire lives over to a medium.

The Cinema can make you cry and change the way you live. Can The Game do that? Not by imitating the worst part of the crappy trailers from the last ten years, it can’t.

I guess it would come across well to the scientist in us if I were to say that, particularly when it comes to audio, we game creators can focus fairly well on an object and we can note fairly accurately what it currently is like. In other words, we can notice its position. But we often ignore its velocity, forget about its acceleration, and are surprised to find that there is a formula that governs its motion through space.

Let’s imagine that a game’s spec calls for “some John Williams, maybe Danny Elfman” (assuming you’re not John Williams—John, if you’re reading this, this does not apply to you), then you’ve got a very good starting point. If you treat that as your stopping point, too, you might be able to schedule things pretty well. Pop out a little John, whip up the invoice, connect the dots, bada-bing, bada-boom, done. That’s how we do it in The Games Business.

A product made this way could turn out good, and often does, but the odds are very much against its turning out great. Do you have a favorite Elvis impersonator? Is he a truly great musician? Do you have a favorite Beatles cover band? Did they change your life or the course of a generation? John Lennon or maybe George Harrison once said, and I love, ironically, to say this in an accent, “They can’t be imitating us, we don’t wear Beatles wigs.”

No, Johnny-or-was-it-George, great performers *don't* wear Beatles wigs. Because people who wear those wigs are only capturing the very sheen of the very surface of the greatness of what's underneath.

On one game to which I had been assigned, I was asked to do “normal game music,” (which, for this kind of game, meant Techno) and when I suggested some different approaches, I met with a brick wall. The developer actually *wanted* not to do something that was unlike other games. I was asked, “George, did it ever occur to you that there is a *reason* that all movies use the same kind of sound for certain types of scenes?”

**Extreme close up: The Fat Man's face remains polite.**

Zoom in, fade to flashback of The Fat Man at USC Film School, sweating his nuts off studying film and music with every bit of devotion he can muster. Split screen. The game developer who asked the question is gargling beer at a frat party, *and* he's still wearing diapers. He shouts out drunkenly that he wishes he could be just *exactly* like John Travolta, then he passes out in the punchbowl. Fade back to The Fat Man's face, and zoom out. Reality begins again. The Fat Man speaks:

“Yes, Friend, but which among those is a great movie soundtrack? They're all imitating *Star Wars*, which was pretty much the first movie to use that sound. *Star Wars* itself, the leader, is a great soundtrack—loved, admired, and imitated. In order to achieve that, wouldn't you think that you would have to innovate?”

He paused for a long time, then said, sincerely, “How does one go about *innovating*?”

It was another *Star Trek* moment. “What is this ‘Love,’ Captain?” “Brain and *Brain*. What is Brain?” “Kiss? Tell me more about this...” “Kiss.” “I'm sure I could have explained every bit of it to him quite well, and changed the course of his life, and probably given him religion, too, by simply saying, “**You have to take RISKS**,” but right then I had to use the john.

Anyway, speaking of which, back to Mr. Williams. Yes, John wrote the music for *Star Wars*. Important, substantial music, and *first* of its kind. A person could do worse than imitate him, so go ahead and do it. BUT, to use the “Be Like Johnny” model to be great, you might do well to keep going.

Begin by imitating his compositions, but go on to learn how to create his feelings.

When you imitate his orchestration, continue, and learn how to be evocative of emotions.

When you imitate his greatness, learn how it progresses; learn how it leaves its own roots behind.

A layman might only see the music as an object, frozen in time and space, and he might copy that and think he has done something wonderful. But here, there is no room for the Hand of God.

A more experienced musician would notice that the object has velocity. He would say, “Ah, I see where that came from, and I see where it was going. It represents an improvement on what went before,” and he would copy that improvement, too.

But the object also has acceleration, and an overall formula to whose rules it dances across a multidimensional Cartesian plane.

The master learns as much of this formula as he can, admires it, wonders at its unfathomable mysteries. And then he writes his own.

Let's not forget that John Williams is not just credited with *Star Wars*. He also wrote the beautiful solo violin theme of *Schindler's List*. Before all that, he did, without imitating anybody / know of, the King of Movie Themes People Like to Imitate: *Jaws*. And you know those hilarious strings in *Gilligan's Island*? Guess what? Look in the credits. Johnny Williams. Same cat.

The guy has history. He changes. He adapts. He makes his own sounds, and they come from his life and the composers he looks up to. Then the sounds come to life, people imitate them, they become a part of who we are. The object has position, velocity, acceleration, and a mysterious formula.

In fact, the story of *Star Wars* is that Lucas had used Holst's *The Planets* as a temp track to the movie, and had liked it so much that he had originally only hired John to reorchestrate that piece. John stood up to him with the suggestion that he be allowed to write some new music.

So I guess that when they ask you for John Williams, don't take it as a request for his melodies and orchestration. The client may not realize it, but he's really asking for a brush with Greatness. The appropriate thing to do is be as great as John, and, like him, do something that moves the player in a way that only *you* would have thought of.

Since I hinted that it is impossible, we know that naturally it is possible to be great by wearing the Wig. Once, I asked my friend Michael Land how it was going, and he was sad. For the seemingly endless series of LucasArts *Star Wars* games, Mike had been analyzing and editing John Williams's actual *Star Wars* scores into tiny bits, dissecting them, re-arranging them, composing little bits of filler, and re-creating the most amazing John Williams Hamburger Helper Casserole you'd ever heard. He would have rather been doing what he termed a "creative project," which would call for original music, such as the (great) *Monkey Island* and *The Dig* scores he'd done. But, nonetheless, it was one job for which you would be hard pressed to argue a case against John Williams *Star Wars*-style music, and Mike had turned the sights of his Mighty Creative Battering Ram toward that wall. In the end, the music he made was indistinguishable from that created by the Johnmeister.

So I says, "Hey, Mike, you choppin' John?"

And he says, "Yep. I'm choppin' John."

And I says, "I think you're gonna be choppin' John till you're jammin' with Jimi!"

A game company was once considering hiring a TV composer whose work they liked. I listened to his work, found it not far out of reach, and offered to imitate his style for half his cost. For a moment, I thought that this might seem like an unkind thing to do to that composer. So I added that they should tell him that if he wanted to imitate my style at half my price, that would be fine with me, because, after all, fair is fair.

**And how do you  
do it? How do  
you innovate?**

**It's easy:  
You take a  
risk.  
How do you  
take a risk?**

**Simple.**

**YOU DO NOT DO  
WHAT WORKS.**

It's good to know what works. It's good to know what people seem to like. But the difference between doing only what works and what *could* work is the difference between following and leading.

**Read this sentence:**

**You cannot  
innovate  
by only doing  
what has  
worked in  
the past.**

This would be a good time for you to consider reading Bruce Sterling's talk in the appendix "Bruce Sterling's Famous GDC Speech," but allow me to sum up its salient points here:

As gamers, we bring to the world some very special gifts. We move forward at lightning speed and embrace technology and invention in a way that surpasses every group of people that has ever come before in all of history. To play it safe in this business is to deny our inner nature. It is to deny our responsibility to the world and to the players. To not take risks is to go against the very principles of fun and risk that define the art of game development.

In short, This Is Gaming. If you're not exposing your players to anything new, then you are just asking them to connect dots. Connect-the-dots is not a game.

**God put you  
on this planet along with  
the other game makers that you might complete  
your mission, a crucial part of which  
is *scaring the crap* out of your investors.**

You are to do this by exposing those investors to your brilliant but untried ideas. And if the thought of that investor walking out the door with his money is too frightening for you, and because of that, you can only bring yourself to propose ideas "that work" and "that people like," then you are not a game maker, you have no idea what makes games fun, and it is morally imperative that you go into another business.

You might try selling soap. People *always* need soap.

And if you don't want to do sell soap, then take risks. Start with the Big Risk, where John and John started: Dedicate your life to your work. And then, you gotta go past them, you gotta innovate, you gotta keep on going. Where? To take the Big Fat Challenge.

### **The Big Fat Challenge:**

**Let's make some kind of new sound,  
like John Lennon did for rock and roll,  
like John Williams  
did for movies, but let's use that  
interactive engine,**

**and that gaming mentality,  
and that  
unique vision,  
and that talent for invention,  
and let's by-God make game audio**

**do something for peoples' hearts and ears  
that movies, that rock-and-roll, that **EVEN**  
**JOHN WILLIAMS** could never do.**

I'll even give you the one thing that the True Gamer in you can't resist. I hereby bet you 10 bucks you can't do it.