

## Should it be live? The virtues of programming it or playing it.

Much of the content written for video games & TV is written in a Midi Project studio. Everything is composed and subsequently manipulated inside computers, samplers and synthesizers. Certain forms of music have evolved from this and should be viewed as musical forms in their own right: dance music, for example, where the only live element is the voice. Or electronic music itself – epitomized by the likes of Kraftwerk or Vangelis. However, advances in sampling technology have allowed composers to create music electronically in styles that have been previously impossible to do convincingly.

The benefits are both obvious and seductive. The composer, unlikely to be able to competently perform all of the instruments of a particular composition single-handed can now program them inside a sequencer to such a degree that they sound virtually indistinguishable from their acoustic counterparts. It is no longer necessary to employ legions of session musicians to come in and play the individual parts. With standard 'band' setups this is great, but the advantage is most apparent when a large amount of musician's would be required. The most obvious example is that of a film score. Film orchestras, together with the addition of a full choir, could well require 120 or more musicians. The biggest plus points of this method are the cost and, potentially, the time saved. Although, as we'll discuss later, it could actually take longer.

But what do you lose out by programming everything?

An unfortunate legacy of video game music from the 80's and early 90s is that everything *sounded* electronic and rigid. The phrase "blip-blop", as horrendous as it may seem, was painfully accurate. Not surprisingly, as technology has developed exponentially over the past 5 years, everyone has been striving forever increasing realism.

The sound of a competent ensemble of live musicians can never be accurately recreated in a computer. Humans are not perfect and it is the little imperfections that result in character and individuality. Musicians "play off" each other making real-time decisions and adjustments in response to the players around them. They create something *organic* through an amalgamation of different musical styles and personality. Each musician will have different likes and dislikes, bringing this – normally subconsciously – to their playing. *They never play the same thing twice.*

Music that *is* played by real musicians can also allow a *fake* visual – such as a computer generated backdrop - to look more realistic through *realistic* and *natural* sound. Designers of video games are often hampered by the technology in realising their vision. Using real, *organic* music can reduce the gap.

Sound does something that nothing else in games can do. It evokes *emotion*. A rousing film score gets the blood pumping in the same way that a live concert can. And chip generated tunes are, arguably, less of a turn on.

The biggest plus point of this method is the end result. The cost will be greater. Depending on the project, it could be quicker (with the programming route you may spend 40% of the composer's time writing the track but another 60% making it sound realistic, whereas that would be offset by the time taken in recording).

So, what's the answer?

If you want your project to sound like 'real' music and your budget is tight, then maybe you need to go electronic. But if you want hairs standing up on the backs of necks and you have a decent budget, start polishing the music stands and prepare to be amazed by the results.