

GDC09 Interview with Scoring Mixer John Rodd

GameDevelopers® Conference

During the last 20 years John Rodd's diverse engineering career has encompassed hundreds of blockbuster film scores and many game scores. His extensive experience with orchestral recording and surround music mixing has made him highly sought after by composers and producers. He has worked internationally in a wide array of recording environments from small studios to the largest scoring stages in the world, including seven years as orchestral scoring recordist at 20th Century Fox's legendary Newman Scoring Stage in Los Angeles. His game scoring mixer and/or recording engineer credits include *The Golden Compass*, *Conan*, *John Woo's Stranglehold*, *Bladestorm: Hundred Years War*, *Onimusha: Dawn of Dreams*, and *SOCOM III: US Navy SEALs*. John Rodd will present "[Recording and Mixing Music for Games: Get that Hollywood Film Score Sound!](#)" at [GDC09](#).



Veteran Scoring Mixer John Rodd at Capital Studio A

M4G: First of all please tell us about your music background and how you got started as a recording engineer and music scoring mixer?

John Rodd: I guess I've always had a strong love of the alchemy between music, art and technology. There were lots of music lessons when I was growing up, but I think a big influence on my musical tastes came from my older sisters. They introduced me to a lot of cool music when I was quite young.

I ended up going to film school, but continued experimenting with music mixing, sampling, and synthesis. I remember scraping enough money together for an Emulator sampler and inviting friends over to yell into it so I could manipulate the sounds. It was all so new, and really expensive! Shortly after graduating from film school in 1989 I landed an assistant engineer position at Manta studios in Toronto. It was one of the best studios in Canada, and I had the opportunity to work with many great Canadian artists as well as learn from some of the best music recording engineers and mixers in the country.

At that time, many American composers came to Canada to record orchestral scores, and I had the pleasure of working with Howard Shore, John Debney, Angelo Badalamenti and many others. I also honed my skills working on folk, jazz, and rock CDs and various post production audio projects.

I decided to pursue my dream of working exclusively on film score projects so I left Manta in 1994 and worked as an engineer first in England and subsequently at The Banff Centre for the Arts.

I moved to LA in 1996 when I was offered a job by Ocean Way Studios in Hollywood where I worked on everything from film scores to rock. Through a combination of very hard work, networking, and blind luck, I landed the position of orchestral scoring recordist for the Newman scoring stage at 20th Century Fox in 1997. I was there for seven amazing and intense years.

In 2004 I took the leap to go freelance as a recording engineer and scoring mixer.



John Rodd recording *The Golden Compass* at Eastwood Scoring Stage, Warner Bros.

M4G: Please explain your role when working with composers. What is the scoring mixer responsible for during the recording process?

John Rodd: When a composer brings me onto a project we have an initial discussion to determine the best recording location. I consider the size of the ensemble, the orchestration, and the type of sound that the composer is going for. This is all put up against the budget the composer has to work with. Once these things are determined, I draw up a layout for the recording studio, pick the best mics for each instrument or section, and then I select what particular preamp will work best with each microphone. I have my own collection of mics and preamps that I like to take with me.

During the actual recording session I run the recording console, multiple cue mixes, the clicks, and I take extensive notes to help with take selection. On occasion I'll run ProTools as well, and do music editing on the fly.



TC 6000 and Console in the Eastwood Scoring Stage Mixing Booth, Warner Bros.

M4G: You've worked on many blockbuster movie soundtracks including *The Bourne Identity*, *The Matrix* and *Pirates of the Caribbean*. How did you get involved with video games?

John Rodd: Obviously video game scores have grown tremendously in terms of budget and sophistication in the past few years. Quite a few years back I met two great composers-Jim Dooley and Jamie Christopherson-who were composing for some gaming projects, and they brought me on board their respective projects. These were big, complicated scores using a variety of virtual and live instruments. Really interesting stuff. Since then I've had the pleasure to work on a wide variety of gaming projects with many different composers.

M4G: What are your aspirations with video games and what excites you about the medium and the creative process in general?

John Rodd: The whole industry has a lot of potential for creative growth. Games aren't as tied down to audience expectation as film is because they don't have a fixed narrative. Gaming offers a relatively free arena for the gamer and the composer. Personally, I love to be able to use multiple layers of interactive music in games. The sound can be really incredible.

M4G: How did your first video game recording session differ from your previous experience with film and records?

John Rodd: The frequent lack of picture and dialog to reference during a gaming recording session creates a very different atmosphere on the scoring stage. That, and the fact that there isn't a film director in the booth. In a way, it's a slightly more intimate setting, even if you're recording an orchestra.



John Rodd and Composer Jamie Christopherson at *The Golden Compass* sessions

M4G: You have worked on numerous projects with Soundelux Design Music Group. How did that relationship form?

John Rodd: I was fortunate to meet Jamie Christopherson at GDC many years back, and we hit it off. At that time Jamie was a staff composer at Soundelux. In both his composing and his orchestrating, Jamie frequently goes for a big, glorious cinematic sound, and this jibes well with my background with large, orchestral feature film scores.

M4G: What has been your favorite game score to work on and why?

John Rodd: There have been great moments on all my game scores, but recording *The Golden Compass* with Jamie at the Warner Bros. Eastwood scoring stage was a wonderful experience overall. I've worked at the Warner Bros. stage many times, but it was Jamie's first time there and the excitement he brought to the day was great. We had a scoring stage full of the best players in LA, and everyone was enjoying themselves. The music Jamie wrote was fantastic, the room and the players sounded tremendous, and everyone seemed to be feeding off of the positive energy.



Orchestra musicians on the Eastwood Scoring Stage, Warner Bros. Studios

M4G: What other game projects are you working on that you can mention?

John Rodd: Unfortunately due to the all too common NDA I'm unable to mention any of the game projects I'm currently working on. However, I can mention that I am about to record and mix the orchestral score for composer Cliff Martinez for an epic feature film starring Gerard Depardieu.

M4G: What types of projects interest you the most? Do you have any preferences/dislikes when considering new projects?

John Rodd: I always have a lot of fun recording and mixing large orchestras. The richness of sound and the endless tonal possibilities never cease to amaze me. Having said that, I listen to just about everything. My wife hates to hit shuffle on my iPod because she never knows what's going to come up. But variety is one of the reasons I love the freelance life: one day I'm recording, mixing, or mastering a live orchestra, the next day it's rock, and the next day electronica or a hybrid project.

I will admit that mixing a purely virtual orchestra cue is not the most thrilling aspect of my job. In my opinion, virtual orchestras still have quite a ways to go to be able to fool me into thinking that they are the real thing.



John Rodd at Eastwood Scoring Stage console working on *The Golden Compass*

M4G: What do you think the video game industry has yet to learn from movie soundtrack recording techniques or do you feel they are now on the same level of quality?

John Rodd: I don't think it is a case of techniques as much as it is about budget. Movies often have use of the best sounding rooms, and they have the best orchestras, the best orchestrators, and the best recording engineers and scoring mixers. When video games use the same spaces, technology, and talent, the quality of the productions are very similar to movie scores. However, when budget limitations cause the music to be recorded in sub-par acoustic spaces, and when gaming composers have to mix their own music the end result will simply not be as good as it could be.

M4G: Has new technology improved the recording process in any discerning ways?

John Rodd: The advent of 24-bit recording and better sounding analog to digital converters has improved the potential quality of recorded audio. Unfortunately, over-compression and the loudness wars invade all aspects of sound production these days, which can be a bit frustrating when you're trying to create a quality sound.

M4G: Finally, what advice would you give to those of our readers who are serious about starting a career in audio engineering?

John Rodd: I would pass along the advice that I was given by an industry veteran twenty years ago: If there is anything else that you could do with your life, then you should do it. Looking back now I know that I was very lucky to have learned my trade from many great recording and mixing engineers over a number of years. I think that it's my background in old-fashioned engineering that prepared me to face some of the challenges of working in this business. I wonder if people starting out these days have the same opportunity to learn from the masters. Music recording studios are closing left, right, and center, and anyone with a \$600 computer and some software can call him or herself an audio engineer. But I don't want to end on a pessimistic note, so if being a music engineer and music mixer is the only thing that you want to do with your life, and if you are ready to pursue it with an unwavering determination, then go for it! It is a craft and a career that I love, and it has given me many great moments in the chair.

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