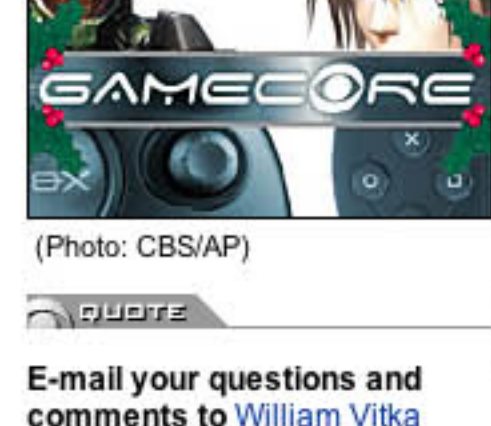


# The Music Behind The Video Games

NEW YORK, Dec. 8, 2004



(Photo: CBS/AP)

**(CBS) Game Core is a weekly column by CBSNews.com's William Vitka that brings you news on the latest and greatest in video games.**

Music in games, like the soundtracks in movies and television, is a crucial factor in creating a truly immersive, emotional experience for players.

## E-mail your questions and comments to William Vitka



Tom Salta (Photo: CBS)

As in any other medium, if the music that accompanies the visuals is lacking — or just plain terrible — then, so is the event.

I spoke to composer **Tom Salta** recently about his new album, the industry, and what might lie down the road for gamers everywhere.

Tom is a music industry veteran who has toured with and worked on releases by artists such as Peter Gabriel, Junior Vasquez, Everything But The Girl, Primer 55, Deep Forest, Mary J. Blige and Sinead O'Connor.

His game credits include the original score to *Need For Speed Underground 2* (EA), and the main themes for *Ghost Recon 2* (Ubisoft), *Still Life* (Microids), *Get On Da Mic* (Eidos/A2M), *RalliSport Challenge 2* (Microsoft Game Studios) and *Street Racing Syndicate* (Namco).

In 2004, Tom did his first solo album. "2 Days Or Die," under the artist name "Atlas Plug." The album, released on his own record label (**Persist Records**), introduces the world to Tom's unique style, and its music has been used on many television shows, commercials, film promos, and video games.

**William Vitka:** Are you a gamer yourself?

**Tom Salta:** Yeah, I am. That's one of the main reasons I got into the game music composing: because I've always been doing music. I've been in the business for 15 years. But I've always been a major hobbyist with video games. I'm always one to try to combine things I love to do as a living. And game music is perfect. It combines music and games; it couldn't be better than that.

**Vitka:** What are you playing right now?

**Salta:** 'Halo 2,' like most everyone else with an Xbox.

**Vitka:** How did you make your way into the business?

**Salta:** Into the game business: About two years ago, I began doing some research, because after I played games like Halo and Splinter Cell and that kind of thing, I really started seeing music get to a whole new level in games. It was no longer the typical bleeps and bleeps of the old days. I started seeing full scores come out, so it really inspired me.

I did some research and I hooked up with a company in Canada called Wave Generation, which represents a lot of the best game composers out there. Then they put me in touch with someone named Bob Rice, who's the top agent for game composers in the world. And I put together a whole reel of stuff that I thought would be good for game music. After a couple of weeks he gave me a call and offered to represent me. I was totally thrilled.

**Vitka:** So, you've been a gamer and a musician, but game composition is more recent?

**Salta:** That's correct, absolutely. I'm fairly new in this industry. And after that happened, it was a matter of just continuously pitching for various games. Sending out hundreds and hundreds of demos. And for a whole year, nothing clicked. It was very, very tough. I went to the conventions in L.A. and no one would give me the time of day.

Then I came up with a crazy idea: Since I have all this experience producing and writing and arranging and mixing, (and) since, apparently, groups like Crystal Method, Moby and Massive Attack are considered so cool — especially in the game industry — because they're electronic artists, I said, "Why don't I create my own electronic artist?"

That's where I came up with **Atlas Plug**.

I decided that I would make an entire album's worth of music, kind of like a calling card, that would be my vision of the perfect kind of music for licensing in games, film, TV commercials, that kind of thing.

In a way, the concept was like a back door into the game industry. I would become recognized and known that way and show what I could do at the same time. And also get free publicity and marketing if I got some placements.

So fortunately, I hooked up with a publisher. And he assisted me. And we started getting placements in games like 'RalliSport Challenge 2' and 'Street Racing Syndicate.'

And then what happened was, Volvo, heard the song that 'RalliSport' used for their trailer. Which was called '2 Days Or Die,' which is the title track of the album.

**Vitka:** '2Days Or Die' and 'Steel Run' are my two favorites from the album. I definitely like the darker industrial sound.

**Salta:** I'm glad you said that. I always loved 'Steel Run.' That's not one I hear a lot from people. I'm glad you said that.

So, Volvo wanted to use 'Days Or Die' for their commercial, which used the graphics from 'RalliSport Challenge 2.' So that became a major publicity thing. For two months, it was on every television station. All of a sudden, everybody started turning their heads. What's **Atlas Plug**? Who's that?

That really helped me gain much more instant credibility in the games industry.

That was step one. That was the licensing.

To compose for games is a whole other thing. If you're a group, sure, they can buy a song off of you for a game. But to be a composer, you have to show a different set of skills.

**Vitka:** You're approaching the game as a musician, as opposed to the game sort of approaching you.

**Salta:** Exactly. At least now, I knew a whole bunch of high-end people by first name. Step two was, now they would actually take my demos and give them a listen, I started being considered for things.

Then early that year, things started clicking. Finally, I got one gig. Then I got another gig. Now I'm on my eighth game that I'm creating music for. It's phenomenal.

It finally took off, and I finally got a chance to show my stuff. But getting over that Catch-22 is always the tough part. What credits do you have? Well (laughs), I don't have any. If you'd give me one, I could get a credit. But I got over that hump; I knew it was just a matter of persistence. And that's why I formed **Persist Records**. That's what I put **Atlas Plug** out on.

**Vitka:** How do you approach a project? Do you see a game that you think is very interesting and then say, 'I want to do the music for this,' or do people approach you?

**Salta:** It happens in different ways. There hasn't been a situation — I'll start with the negatives — basically, there has not been a situation where I knew about a game ahead of time and I said, "Hey, I want to score that," and then I got it. Because generally, you don't even know they exist at that stage.

So, they contact me, or my manager will send me a request saying that a client wants to hear a demo of mine. Or, I'll be asked to pitch potential music for a game or theme. Then my manager will send that to several of his composers who he thinks will be best for the job. That's generally the way it works.

**Vitka:** You've done commercial work and television work and now video game work — how do the different media compare when you're scoring them?

**Salta:** There are great differences between games and other media. Generally, other things like commercials, films, television — it's a linear process. Basically, you see the scene and you create the music for it. Done. Its 30 seconds front to back, you're done. Games, if I had to simplify it, break down into two categories: cinematics and in-game music.

Cinematics are just like anything else. Commercials where they'll show you a 10 second, 20 second, 30 second movie clip, and you make the music for it. Done.

The other part is where it really sets the game composers apart from everybody else. You're now composing music in-game, and generally music in-game has to be very dynamic. It has to be flexible. You can't just compose a 30 second piece and let it stay that way. It's got to react to what's going on in the game.

For example, the game I'm doing now — that I can't say the name of — it has to react to the scene. So, I have to construct music in a way that the game can reconstruct it in any way that it sees fit. I have to give it the building blocks. It's kind of like composing music as a jigsaw puzzle that gets taken apart and can be put together. But it has to be able to be put together in different ways. So, if you walk into a room and there is a whole bunch of creatures in there, the music has to determine how many, is it a little, is it a lot, what's the threat, how long does the fight go, when the fight ends, then what happens?

The music begins to compose as it goes. The game engine really assembles the music.

I did another game on a hand-held, called 'Sprung,' and the music had to react to the emotions of the Artificial Intelligence in the game. So if someone felt sad or happy or excited, I had to make music and break it down into components that will reconstruct, can be reconstructed in different ways.

So, it becomes a bit of a challenge.

And lastly, you don't always see what it's going to look like! You've got to compose blind sometimes. I have yet to have a situation where I actually get to play the game before I compose the music for it.

It's interesting. That's why being a gamer really gives you an advantage. Because if you're not a gamer, you don't know what it's like. You don't know what works. I play games all the time and I'm always listening. Like, 'Oh wow, that is the coolest music! The way that works with the scene.' It gives you ideas.

When you really immerse yourself in the gaming experience, I think it makes you a better game composer.

**Vitka:** It's actually interesting to think of the audio as being liquid and having to fit the emotions of the gamer at any given moment.

**Salta:** Right! And it could cut itself short or it could be extended. You've got to make it in a way that's very flexible. It can be challenging.

It's great to see how sophisticated the (games) soundtracks are getting these days. They're starting to sometimes surpass major motion picture soundtracks.

**Vitka:** Do you think video game music is its own genre? Do you think it can stand on its own as a genre? Or do you think there are certain kinds of video game music that just fits into other genres?

**Salta:** I think it should be its own genre, quite frankly. I see it going in that direction. And I think we're just getting to that point where it can stand on its own. I don't think that if you asked me that question three years ago, I could honestly say that there's enough body of work out there of a certain caliber, that would stand on its own as music without the game.

But I think that today, the thought and attention and quality are really going into the game music soundtracks. And you see the explosion of sales — they're selling soundtracks a lot now.

It's really great to see video game music coming out and people actually buying it. That's really exciting for me, that's exactly what I hoped would happen when I envisioned getting into the (games) industry two years ago.

**Vitka:** It must be wonderful to be on the forefront of this whole new frontier. There were live performances and then radio, then you'd hear music in television and on the big screen and now, there's this whole new way of presenting scores.

**Salta:** Right, and I think the audience is there. The audience is growing incredibly rapidly for gamers. The number of people that buy these games — I mean, 'Need For Speed Underground 2,' is supposed to sell millions of copies. My God, you know? That's pretty crazy.

Just to get back to the **Atlas Plug** idea, one of the things I wanted to do in there — it's part of my philosophy with game music — I love to create game music that can stand on its own. Not all game music can. I don't think that, if you took certain music out of a game, that you'd really want to sit there and listen to it. The stuff that really interests me is the stuff that you can sit down and listen to and image, it brings you back to the experience. Just like a movie.

That's what I'm into. And with **Atlas Plug**, a lot of the songs on there are my ideas for themes to various games.

**Vitka:** One of the first things I had noticed about '2 Days Or Die' was that it sounded organic; it didn't sound like electronica so much to me. It sounded like there was warmth and emotion in it. It doesn't sound like video game music, it sounds like a stand-alone album that has a purpose detached from the game.

**Salta:** Yeah, and that's the way I'd like to see game music continuing to go. When you say game music to someone who's 40 years old, they're going to assume it's very computerized and not organic at all. But anyone who's a gamer knows that today's soundtracks can be incredibly organic. Full, live orchestras, massive recordings, where you would not be able to tell the difference between the sound of that and the sound of the 'Lord Of The Rings' soundtrack. It's the same thing. A 90 piece orchestra is a 90 piece orchestra. Game music is, I think, really going to be able to stand on its own.

**Vitka:** Why did you choose the name, **Atlas Plug**?

**Salta:** Oh, that's an easy one. Atlas spelled backwards is Salta. And Plug just sounded cool. But it's also a play-on-words; it's a way of plugging myself. It's the opposite of unplugged, which is acoustic, it's electronic, so it's plugged.

But, primarily, I just thought it sounded cool!

By William Vitka  
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