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Tom Salta Gripped By Cold Fear

Composer discusses his score for Ubisoft's new survival horror game.

March 24, 2005 - Dedicated gamers are no doubt familiar with Tom Salta's work. His music has been attached to such high profile projects as *Need For Speed Underground 2* and *Ghost Recon 2*. Yet if you took the time to check out Salta's discography to date you'll notice that he's a little light on the survival horror side of things. Well, that's all about to change thanks to *Cold Fear*, which more or less marks Salta's first musical foray into the survival horror genre of video games. Granted he contributed music to the upcoming game *Still Life*, but he won't deny that this game shares very little in common with *Cold Fear*.

"*Still Life* is much more of a pure adventure game," Salta clarifies. "The kind of score that I did [for that] was much more ambient and [in the] background. Whereas *Cold Fear* definitely has a much more broad and aggressive range of styles including full orchestral music, heavy industrial, and ambient—an overall wider range of styles."

Given that Salta is best recognized by his intense driving game scores, how did he come to be involved in the more violent, survival horror nuances of *Cold Fear*? "I was contacted by Ubisoft," he explains. "They requested that I submit a pitch for the game. They provided very detailed documents to me, as well as many other composers, that described in very intricate detail the kinds of moods, emotions, sounds, textures, plot, everything they were looking for in the theme. It was my job to basically come up with a full-fledged theme for the game and that became my demo pitch. They chose me and that demo pitch ended up being the exact theme to the game that you hear when you put it into your Xbox or PS2 and turn it on."



Now if you peruse Salta's personal website you'll stumble upon a section denoted as "Client Feedback." In this section is a glowing quote from Manu Bachel, the Audio Creative Manager at Ubisoft. Within Bachel's quote he mentions that Tom was forced to endure an "aggressive schedule" and "lots of technical constraints." It's no secret that more often than not composers are expected to crank out intricate compositions in as little as 3-to-6 weeks. It's the rare luxury when a composer is given several months to craft a full length video game or film score. In terms of *Cold Fear*, Salta was literally under the gun.

"I came on pretty late in the game," Salta explains of when he became attached to the project. "They hired me in the middle of November 2004. I think my first submission of music was on November 16th or so and I actually had to be done with the entire score by December 23rd!" Within the confines of this "aggressive schedule" Tom managed to compose no less than 20 different individual pieces of music as well as nine cut scenes. "It ended up being over an hour's worth of music which I composed in under six weeks."

And what of those aforementioned "technical constraints"? "When you're dealing with the kind of game that *Cold Fear* is and the kind of implementation that they wanted to do themselves, I had to create music that had to be multi-layered so that the various layers can independently be triggered to create different levels of intensity," says Salta. "For example, Layer 1 was meant to be the ambient, calm layer. Whereas when Layer 2 kicked in the audio engine would determine this by what was going on in the game and the music would add a bit more intensity. And then Layer 3, when that kicked in, it was meant to take it over-the-top when you're completely overwhelmed with creatures or zombies or whatever is set to happen in the game. That kind of structure does inherently have restraints in it because each piece, each track, each stripe has to sound good enough to stand on its own, but they also have to work together and you don't have the luxury of being able to change individual details about each of the layers when other layers are introduced. So they all have to fit together like a puzzle and they should feel seamless."



Despite the time constraints and the technical restrictions Salta was required to work within, his main goal was to craft a score that was both epic and disturbing. Never mind that these are two descriptions which, on the surface, appear to be diametrically opposed to one another. "I gotta tell you, that kind of balance, those kind of opposites, is what I love about game music. That's why I got into it." Salta enthuses. "I love juxtaposing opposite elements and having them hit each other and collide and actually somehow work. Even in the theme of *Cold Fear* when they wanted epic, it meant that they wanted that Hollywood orchestral score where it feels like a big, Hollywood movie. After defining what they meant by disturbing, I just found the best ways possible that I could come up with to integrate that and combine it into music where you could have both those elements living simultaneously together. For me that just seems to come naturally. I enjoy the challenge and it's just the way I like to create."

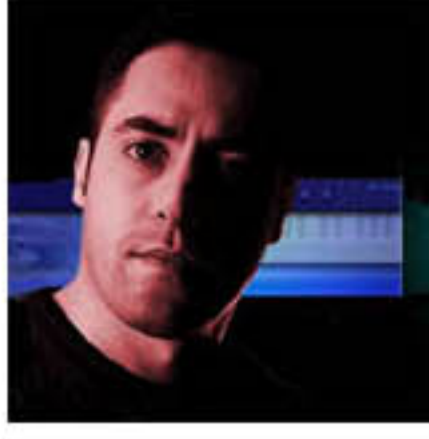
Contrary to what one would think Salta did not immerse himself in the works of George Romero or any of the numerous Italian survival horror films of yesteryear. In fact he laughs at the mere thought. "Really, my main influence

for this score was the developer's vision," he says. "The musical references they gave me were very helpful because of the detail that they wanted. They provided me with short clips of music in various styles referring to certain details in the music that they liked. So really what I did for a few days, up to about a week, is that I sat down reading through the documents and picture they had given me, listening to the music samples and trying to get in their heads. What I did ask them is what kind of movies inspired the game. That helped me really get into the creator's mind. Looking at this game I clearly saw the influence of *Alien* and games like *Resident Evil* and movies like *The Perfect Storm*. I kind of just let that all digest and assimilated all of that into my head so by the time I was ready to start I kind of just instinctually knew what to do. So I plowed through it really fast."



Given that *Cold Fear* is a survival horror game, what does Salta consider the most appropriate sound of fear? "To me, to get that emotion there's got to be a certain sense of tension, a certain sense of surprise," he replies. "I think in this game the essence of fear comes down to the techniques and the sound palettes and the overall approach to the music. What was really important in *Cold Fear* is that they wanted the music itself, the sounds themselves, to contain and feel like they are in the game. So I used a lot of metal sounds, I used a lot of liquid gurgling, I used low, subliminal growls and breathing and unpredictable noises, things like that scattered throughout. And then for me, creating a sense of fear and tension comes naturally, whether it's blending music with sound design elements such as dissonant clusters over low, intimidating drones or experimenting with uneasy melodies and odd time signatures that really keep you on edge. Additionally we incorporated old fashioned ear candy like intimidating screams and scary background reverb to make you feel like you're not safe. It was a lot of fun weaving these ideas into the score."

-- Spence D.



ARTIST INFO

[Web Site](#)

Description

Noted composer who has scored video games such as *Need For Speed Underground 2* and *Ghost Recon 2* and whose music from his solo album *Atlas Plug: 2 Days To Die* has been featured on a variety of television programs ranging from *Third Watch* to *Punk'd*.