

NI Tech Talk

- Tom Salta
- Crystal Method
- Detroit Underground
- Yello
- Deepsky
- Paul Mirkovich
- Junkie XL
- Richie Hawtin
- John Keane
- Alexander Kowalski
- Martin L. Gore
- Phobek
- Mogwai
- Wix Wickens
- Greg Hunter
- Ben Watkins
- Swag
- Linkin Park
- John Tejada
- David Newman
- Marius De Vries
- Subatomic Sound System
- DJ Hell
- Speedy J
- Justus Köhnke
- Gareth Jones
- Nils Petter Molvaer
- Console
- Aramabar
- Air Liquide
- Surgeon
- Manuela Krause
- Mouse On Mars
- Kabuki
- Mark Bell
- Richard Devine
- Sun Electric
- SolarX

Tech Talk with Tom Salta



Tom Salta

MTV. NI spoke to Tom about his work and background, and about what makes scoring for games so interesting and unique.

Interview by Bela Canhoto

When did you decide music was your calling? How did you start out?

As early as high school I was helping local groups record their demos. When I was eighteen, I produced a single that was aired on the biggest radio station in New York, Z-100. But it wasn't until I returned from touring with Bobby Brown, Whitney Houston and Mary J. Blige in the early 90s, that I decided studio work was my calling. Shortly after I teamed up with a friend of mine and we started producing various indie projects, mostly rock and pop oriented. In the mid-90s I ran into Junior Vasquez and spent several years producing dance remixes with him. Simultaneously I expanded my network of colleagues and worked with many established recording artists and producers, as well as developing and producing new artists. I also worked with several jingle houses and worked on commercials from time to time.

How long have you been composing, and when did you get into game audio?



I've been writing and producing music for fifteen years. But it was only a few years ago when I decided the games business was where I really wanted to be. It was an epiphany and I remember the instant it occurred to me.

How is producing for games different from other work you have done?

For one thing, most of my work this year was done without any other contributors in the studio. Normally, I am used to working regularly with singers, guitar players and other producers. This year was mostly a solo affair. Game scoring also introduced me to another element which I never got deep into in my previous endeavors, namely orchestral work. My first experience in creating orchestral music was so exciting that I had to start incorporating it into my other music.

Do you find composing for games is very different from composing for yourself or musicians? Is the process and tools you use different?

Yes and no. On a technical level, the tools for recording traditional and game music are the same for me. Creatively speaking, when composing for musicians/groups, or myself, there are no visuals to consider, or how sections A, B, and C would sound going into or combined with sections D, E and F. Composing and writing a song, commercial, movie or trailer is a linear process. It always sounds one way. Games, on the other hand, are interactive and the music, in many cases, needs to be flexible and progressive.



Cold Fear

In traditional music, it's all about the song: Getting the main hook, verses and bridge just right. It's about getting that perfect vocal take, background vocals, etc. In game music, the focus is about supporting the visual and creating the exact feel and emotion the director wants for a particular scene or section of the game. Then you sometimes have to deal with technical aspects that are unique to the game world. For example, in Cold Fear, most of the in game music was comprised of small two to three minute pieces that created various emotions like

mystery, suspense, action, full out terror and so on. Each of these compositions had to contain three subgroups that could be brought in and out by the game engine to create different intensities to match the action. I had to make sure that all the subgroups sounded good when played individually or combined. I didn't have the luxury of pulling out a bass line from group 1 when group 3 kicked in. They all had to fit together like a puzzle. These are the kinds of challenges unique to the area of game composing.

What hardware and software are you using?



Currently I run Logic on a Macintosh G4 with a ProTools Mix plus system in OS 9, but that will be changing very soon. I'm planning to upgrade to a Pro Tools HD Accel system with Logic 7, but my current rig has been so reliable and I've been too busy to upgrade... which is a good thing.

How were you introduced to Native Instruments?

My first experience using NI software was with the Pro-52, shortly after it hit the market many years ago. I was completely blown away with how authentic it sounded. I instantly appreciated many of its features. The interface was great and definitely captured that "vintage feeling". Yet more importantly, it was an inspiring instrument to use and contained tons of useful sounds. And now with the Pro-53,

it's even more powerful.

What NI gear are you using and are any of the instruments especially helpful for your electronic sounds?

I'm currently using Pro-53, Absynth 2, Kompakt, Intakt, and Reaktor. As far as modern electronic sounds go, I find Reaktor and Absynth to be incredibly inspiring. I also work with many of those sample-library instruments that use Kompakt as their front end. It keeps things nice and simple.

What are your favorite NI instruments overall and what do you like most about them?

That's a close call. As far as a pure synth, I love Absynth and I can't wait to try the latest version. Whenever I want something unique, I go to Absynth. Most of the sounds are simply "ready-to-go" and just sound great in the mix. Another group of instruments that impress me are those in Reaktor. Although I've only touched the surface, I still find myself tweaking and coming up with some very unique sounds.



Please tell us about the role NI gear played in the score to Cold Fear.

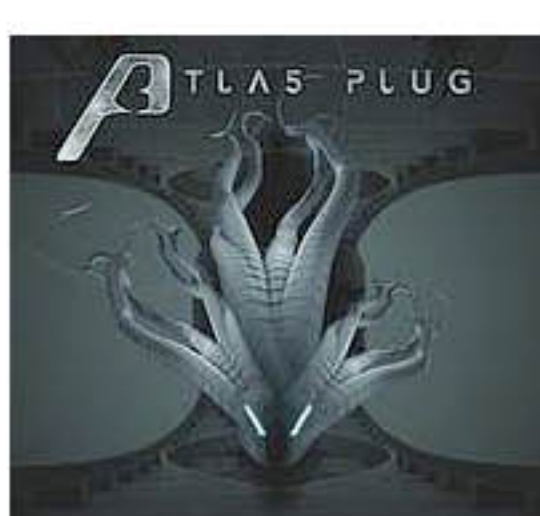
NI gear proved to be invaluable for this latest scoring project. In fact, Jo Ardalán from NI helped design some of the custom sounds that I used in the final mix of the soundtrack. One of the most unique synths we used was Metaphysical Function from the Electronic Instruments 2 collection. It was absolutely perfect for creating certain dark, ambient, electronic soundscapes. When I first heard it, I instantly knew it would be perfect for the game. It also has one of the coolest looking user interfaces I've ever seen. Absynth 2, of course, was another major player as was the Kompakt player that so many other libraries use for a front-end such as QLSO, Altered States and Adrenalin.

How has using the software changed the way you make music?

I could never think of going back to the days before I started using these instruments. It has allowed me to work faster, more efficiently and has given me the freedom to experiment with an incredibly large palette of sounds. Having the convenience of instant recall and the ability to easily save and organize my favorite sounds has become invaluable and affords me a whole new level of productivity. But the most important thing about any instrument is the quality of the sound. The way I judge a new synth is how it inspires me to create and how it sounds in the mix. When I come across an inspiring sound that immediately fits in the track without any additional effects or processing, I know it's a keeper. With NI gear like Absynth, Pro-53 and Reaktor, that happens quite often.

Do you feel a difference in quality between analog and digital? What are the discernable advantages or disadvantages?

I think the whole analog versus digital debate is starting to settle down into an area where most professionals agree. Everyone knows the main allure of analog gear is the natural "warmth" that we associate with it. The disadvantage is pretty much everything else; the inconvenience, inconsistency and expense. You might say that digital recording has the exact opposite set of advantages and disadvantages. It's incredibly convenient, consistent, and cost effective, yet it doesn't add warmth and has even been accused of sounding harsh and brittle. The thing is you can't accuse digital recording of creating a harsh, brittle sound. Digital is simply comprised of ones and zeros, it doesn't have a "sound". Now, in the world of virtual instruments, your signal is born in and usually never leaves the digital domain and some digital instruments can indeed be accused of sounding harsh and brittle. If a software instrument doesn't already sound amazing, there's little hope of improving it, there are no analog circuits or tubes that will breathe life into the sound. Even tube emulating software has little chance of resurrecting a sterile soft synth. That's the main reason I love Native Instruments gear so much. Out of the box these instruments sounds fantastic. Absynth is a perfect example of this. I usually end up printing the sound as is and it always seems to fit perfectly in the mix. Or take a synth like the Pro-53. It has all the sonic goodness of its vintage cousin, but it's a soft synth that can be instantly recalled, used an infinite number of times and will never break down. In my book that's truly the best of both worlds.



Atlas Plug

What other projects do you have on the side? Are you doing independently? Any collaborations in the works?

My main focus now is scoring for games, film/TV soundtracks and continuing to develop my solo artist project "Atlas Plug". I just completed scoring my eighth game this year - a modern, industrial-fused orchestral soundtrack for Cold Fear. This was one of the most fulfilling projects I've ever worked on and it gave me a chance to explore and combine several different styles of music that I love into one cohesive score. I had the chance to create fully orchestral Hollywood style music, hard industrial electronica, eerie and dark ambient music

and my own signature style, which combines aggressive electronic and orchestral instruments together. Although this last year has been a solo year, I love collaborations and I definitely plan on producing and writing with other songwriters and artists.

Are there any pivotal moments in your career that you would like to share, good or bad?

There have been lots of unexpected twists and turns in my career. Breaking into the game industry was a major challenge but I think my individual skill-set and experiences in the recording industry, as well as perseverance, has brought me to where I am now. Games are the new platform for evolving music and I'm very fortunate to be working in such a cutting-edge segment of the entertainment industry with these talented visionaries.

How do you think music production will change over the next few years, for yourself and the industry? What would you like to see change?

I see the continuance of software replacing their hardware equivalents. This technology will continue to allow more and more emerging talent to realize their musical ideas right in their own homes. Absynth sounds just as good rendered on a Powerbook in a dusty apartment as it does in the Hit Factory. I feel this will continue to open the door for young artists and groups to emerge untainted by a major label's influence.

What I'd like to see is a musical market where talented pioneering artists can reach the mainstream listener more directly. I've only seen a few recent artists that have a kind of original sound or identity. I'm looking forward to the return of a musical environment where artists with the potential of Peter Gabriel, Stevie Nicks, Seal, Chaka Khan, Pink Floyd or The Beatles can thrive. I feel the only area of music where pioneers are doing great is in Hip-Hop. I'd like to see that pioneering spirit return to other areas of music.

I am happy to say that in the technical side of the music world, there is no lack of a pioneering spirit. I feel NI is one of the main pioneering companies that is constantly breaking new ground in this exciting new world of software instruments. Hats off for these unique and inspired tools.

Thanks for your time, Tom.

You are welcome.

products

Rob Playford



"Being able to control all those parameters with any controller is amazing. Synchronized or not, LFO controlled or manually adjusted, it's just great being able to have things move." Other artists on KONTAKT...

products

Legal Doping

AUTHOR FM7 Sounds
Junkie XL Vol.2 injects 256 excitingly new sounds into the FM7 synthesizer. Available now and legally in stores and the NI Online Shop.

community

EXTRA! EXTRA!



Native Instruments offers a wide selection of newsletters so you can stay informed on the products, news and events that interest you most

products

Harmony



Fill your productions with rich and luscious chords. Resochord imprints harmonic structures onto any input signal including percussive sounds and elements...

products

VOKATOR in Detail



Six brand-new web pages explain why VOKATOR is the most advanced combination of vocoding tools ever created

community

Famous NI Fans

Mouse On Mars, Twerk, and Nine Inch Nails are all using NI applications to create their unique tracks. More NI users...

products

Extreme Sport



With KONTAKT 2s step modulators and 32-point envelopes, you can help flabby samples get into Olympic shape.