

Jesper Kyd Talks About Hitman

By [SonicControl](#) / June 15, 2004

Sonic Control founder, Ryan Miglierina, interviews Jesper Kyd on game composing.



SC: What is your background as a composer and how did you first get started in the industry?

JK: I had my first game soundtrack released when I was 19 – that was back in Denmark. I’ve been in the US for about 10 years now. I left Denmark together with a bunch of guys and we formed a game company. Our game got sold to Sega. Then about 5 years ago my friends returned to Denmark and started IO Interactive, the makers of the Hitman series and Freedom Fighters. So I decided to stay here [in Manhattan] and build my own music production company Jesper Kyd Productions.

SC: Before you get started on a project, what do you use for inspiration and motivation to ensure that you get the right musical “feel”?

JK: It varies for each project. Sometimes you get a game demo and you play it a lot and that offers great inspiration (if the game demo is at a state where you can actually determine how the game is going to feel.) One of the most important things is getting a feel for how the game flows. You can also draw inspiration elsewhere from paintings, photos, movies, screenshots and whatever you can come up with to help you portray the right atmosphere. I do quite a bit of musical research before I start. I don’t just sit down and write the music, I’m always very selective with the music style and how the music should be represented. I can’t just sit down and write a track and hope the rest of the soundtrack will just work in that style. It’s important to come up with a style that has continuity for the whole game. If there’s no common thread in the soundtrack, then it’s not going to work.

SC: Are there any composers working in the music industry that you currently look up to today?

JK: I enjoy composers such as Vangelis and Jerry Goldsmith. I’m into anything that’s experimental and I appreciate composers who go out there and create their own musical style – that’s what I’ve been trying to do for the last 12 years.

SC: As a composer, how early are you typically involved in a game project?

JK: That differs. Sometimes it’s from the very beginning, especially if you work with the developers. It’s good to be involved from the very beginning because you get a lot of inspiration while getting a feel for the project before you start writing. It’s always beneficial to have a significant amount of time to research it and figure out all the details so once you’re ready to write, everything just kind of flows automatically through the music. Other times it’s a little bit trickier especially when working with big publishers because they often don’t contact you until the last moment. Then again, in those situations where the game is planned so far ahead, you

can just look at the game and it'll give you enough inspiration and you can write the score without too much trouble. Sometimes in the case of an early demo situation, it's tricky to figure out how to write the appropriate music when it doesn't have the right graphics and a lot of the factors may change.

SC: As far as Hitman and Freedom Fighters go, how early were you involved in those projects?

JK: Pretty much from the beginning. Those are my friends from Denmark, so we've known each other and worked together for a long, long time.

SC: How does the timeframe and process involved with writing music for a game differ from the film projects you've worked on?

JK: Film projects are a lot different. Usually when you get involved with a film, the film has been shot, edited and you can sit down and get an idea about what will be required whereas with a game, it's a lot more up in the air. I'm often asked to come up with music examples and styles to portray what would fit a game. For example, Freedom Fighters was a very experimental soundtrack with lots of beats and rhythms, percussion, synthesizers mixed with a Russian Hungarian radio choir singing in Latin and Russian. You get to experiment more with games because a more unique soundtrack is definitely going to benefit the game. A film is more of a case of where it has to fit the scene and that's very important. A director can see right away whether he likes the music direction or not and if it's going to work. So you're kind of like a slave to the image in film so that everything works with every single scene. It can't be too obnoxious and it has to be more in the background. With a game you might be stuck in a level for two hours so it has to be written in a way that is very interesting to listen to. That's at least what I try to do.

SC: How do you generally go about getting jobs for writing music in games and film?

JK: That's interesting – I get in touch with people and I have my contacts. I've been composing music professionally for 12 years now so it's been a while and I also have an agent and those types of things that help me out.

SC: What happens in a typical scoring session for some of the larger scale projects that you've worked on, for example Freedom Fighters or Hitman: Contracts?

JK: Well, it's all different. Freedom Fighters was quite an effort with the Hungarian radio choir. I had a French author write poems in Russian and Latin, and those were integrated into the choir sessions. I mixed everything here at my studio. With Hitman 2, I worked with the Budapest Symphony Orchestra and also the Hungarian Radio choir and we mixed everything at a big TV studio in Copenhagen. I just did another score for Eidos for an upcoming project and we mixed that one in Paris and that was also with the Budapest Symphony and the choir. I do a lot of symphony and choir scores. On the other hand with Hitman: Contracts, it only has about 2 tracks with choir in them. It's more of a fusion of electronica and atmospherics with a night-club/electronic vibe. It's a very dark score but incorporates lots of melodies to support the main character and his decisions on why he does the things he does.

SC: Now when you say it's a sort of club kind of score, would say it draws on elements of trance music?

JK: No, it's not a trance thing. I was a big trance writer back in the day. I started out with trance, then went to goa, then to hard trance. Then I went to drum n' bass and techno, then deep

house. I have roots in the dance scene, so I always pay a lot of attention to my rhythms and my beats and percussion. I definitely draw inspiration from a lot of those music genres in this score, but it's not something that's really raver music. There's one track that is like a club track, but it's for a night club scene so it was specifically written for that segment. Everything else kind of lays in the background and gives you this modern, edgy and unsettling sound. It was quite a challenge to incorporate a lot of melody into such an evil score because people usually go with the evil all the way and that type music is almost un-listenable, especially if you look at film soundtracks. Some of the best evil scores like Aliens for example, are very difficult to listen to. You wouldn't be able to listen to that music for 2 hours, especially if it were a 5 minute track. So I have to come up with something that works both ways.

SC: What would a typical day be like scoring Hitman: Contracts?

JK: I just would play a lot of the game and try to think about what sort of feel as far as audio goes for each different scenario. I like to write music that works for different elements of the game so you can use the different tracks for various placements. A lot of games have a 2 minute loop and it's going to loop until you complete a certain area of the level. So if the level takes you an hour to complete, you're going to be listening to this 2 minute loop for an hour. It drives everybody crazy and people are going to end up shutting the sound off, but this is what happens to 90% of the games. That's one reason why game music is not necessarily well respected because of things like 2 minute loops. Also, low production value exists in many games, even with some of the bigger titles.

SC: How long would it take you to produce a track or cue for part of the Hitman: Contracts score?

JK: It usually takes anywhere from like 2-3 days or 2-3 weeks, depending on what's involved.

SC: When you're working with an orchestra or choir on these types of projects, do you prepare the scores yourself for the musicians?

JK: Yes, I prepare parts of it. I have an orchestrator that works with me, so he checks everything and prints it out. I write all the music and then we make sure everything is optimized for the orchestra.

SC: Do you do mock-ups with samples before taking the music to the orchestra?

JK: Yes definitely. I use the Vienna Cube quite a bit, I use GigaStudio and I have a ProMega 3 from GeneralMusic that has some awesome piano sounds on it. I have two Emu6400 samplers that I use mainly for orchestral tracks. The SAM Trombones library is just outstanding.

SC: What sort of sample libraries do you turn to for non-orchestral sounds?

JK: I use a lot of my own stuff. Obviously there are some good VST plug-ins out there like Stylus for example. I create most of my own sounds. I like to sample things and change them. Because I come from the whole dance music scene, I have a lot of respect for people who create their own sounds – You hear something unique and original; It's not just lifted from somewhere else.

SC: Do you take any steps to inject that extra level of realism into your sampled orchestral sequences?

JK: I don't really focus too much on that concept. I don't think that an orchestral track that's extremely "realistic sounding" is that much better. I really don't like to invest my time on the re-creation process as there are much better ways to approach it. I mix all kinds of different electronics in the background and do all sorts of weird things to make it the right atmosphere. That's what's really important to me because you can never really achieve a perfect orchestral sound unless you go with a real orchestra. It's always going to be "almost" no matter how hard you try so I feel it's like a losing battle. I'd rather just say "Let's go record this with an orchestra if you're really that concerned about it sounding acoustic."

SC: Do you have any specific mixing, EQ or other techniques that you use to achieve maximum realism in your sequences even if you're just creating your own sounds?

JK: I just basically tweak everything as much as I can and come up with ideas. I pay a lot of attention to hi-end, low-end, mid-end etc., but it's all basically second nature, not specific techniques.

SC: What kind of gear and sample libraries do you use in your studio?

JK: Ah, I've got lots of gear. I've got about 28 synthesizers, let's see... I use the V-synth quite a bit, Promega3, VL1 from Yamaha, the Andromeda, the Emu6400's, a whole bunch of drum machines but the Machine Drum is my favorite, the CS80, Oberheim OBXA, TB303. I still have my JD990 which I still enjoy, the FS1R from Yamaha is very interesting. The Sherman distortion box is very cool, that's about all I can remember off the top of my head but there IS more stuff.

SC: Do you use any software plug-ins for processing your audio?

JK: I don't use very much processing. I do it more in a routing space through each other and having things kind of end up like that.

SC: What sequencer do you use? What ultimately led you to the decision to use your current sequencer over other sequencers?

JK: Cubase 5.1. I used Dr.T on the Amiga before that, it was genius I think. I tried out Cubase and I stuck with it, started with Cubase score and went from there. When the whole VST was introduced I was completely hooked. It's not SX, but I'm part of those composers who are sticking to 5.1 until Steinberg gets their MIDI together.

SC: Are you sequencing on the Mac platform, and is there any reason why you would prefer using one platform over the other?

JK: I have about 5 computers in my studio, 4 PCs and a Mac. I do all my sequencing on PC and all of my recording on Mac.

SC: What are your favorite pieces of gear in your studio that you couldn't see yourself working without?

JK: I love my patchbay, I really do. Also my hard disc recording system, the MOTU 2408 Mkii. Also the Yamaha 02r – I couldn't imagine being without that. The Promega 3 – the sounds on that are just fantastic.

SC: Do you use any hardware for EQ and reverb?

JK: KSP8 from Kurzweil, it's my primary reverb box.

SC: Do you often incorporate live music tracks with your sequenced tracks, and how do you accomplish that?

JK: Well, I do it several different ways. Sometimes I put things together in Cubase to get an idea of how it's going to sound and other times I do mixes in studios. I feel it's just a very important part to be able to sit down and have 3 people working on it, all giving each other's opinions. I have mixed myself in the past but I really do prefer it when we go to Paris or Copenhagen to mix in a collaborative atmosphere.

SC: Once you've completed the cues for a game score, how do you deliver them to the production team?

JK: Whichever way they want. Usually it's just wav format. You either upload it to an FTP or send them a CD. Sometimes it's 48kHz, sometimes it's 44kHz, sometimes it's 16-bit and sometimes it's 24-bit.

SC: Do you also conduct, and how does conducting for a game differ from conducting a film score?

JK: No, I do not – I like to sit in the control booth with the orchestrator and discuss everything. I feel it's much better than just one guy in charge down there conducting and then that's it, nothing else. I really like the comfort of being able to discuss everything all of the time. If there is always something that one of us feels doesn't sound as good as it could, you can always stop it and say "Ok, what are we going to do?" and you can talk about it. It's just better that way.

SC: Does the orchestra have a reading session before they start to record on the game projects you've done?

JK: We send the orchestra the score beforehand before we record it. The conductor goes through it and makes his own personal notes and they practice it a bit and then when we show up we just go for it.

SC: How long does one of your typical orchestral recording sessions last?

JK: The last one I did was 2 days with the orchestra and 2 days with the choir. Each day there were 2 sessions and each session was about 3 or 4 hours.

SC: What projects are you currently working on and what can you tell us about them?

JK: Well I'm doing a new project for Take2 and that's all I can say about that. I just did a project for Konami called Todd McFarlane's Evil Prophecy. I also recorded another epic live symphonic score for Eidos last summer, but I can't talk about that yet either. Hitman: Contracts has just come out as well.

SC: What type of music have you written for the score to Todd McFarlane's Evil Prophecy?

JK: It's like an orchestral action score, very gothic sounding. It's quite a gothic game with Todd McFarlane designing several of the characters. It's based on Todd McFarlane's Monsters series of action figures so it has all of the different action figures in the game like the Dracula, the Werewolf, and the Sea Monster. It's an orchestral gothic action score, all put together with samples and stuff. I'm using the Vienna library on that quite a bit.

SC: How do you feel that game music has evolved in the past few years and how do you feel it will evolve in the future?

JK: I feel it's getting big. It's getting more and more attention. For example, I now have soundtracks out in record stores worldwide and it's definitely different from a few years ago. It's going in the right direction and now that we have Hollywood film composers like Danny Elfman and Lalo Schiffrin and all these top composers composing theme music for games it's going to mean that people are going to start paying more attention to games and people will start to respect game music a little more. They might think if Danny Elfman composes music for a game it's not all that bad. We have quite a bad image in game music and I completely agree with that image because I feel that 90% of all game music is completely generic and tries to copy Hollywood. It always ends up sounding almost as good as Hollywood, which is a big failure, I think. I always have tried to make my music stand on its own. I would hate to have somebody say "It sounds almost as good as John Williams", you know? Let's just start working with orchestras and copy Hollywood and make generic orchestral music. That's the latest trend. It's a good thing that big audio budgets are starting to happen and of course that big production values are on top. It might be a very generic orchestral soundtrack, but the sound quality will be very good. Ultimately it will be more difficult for people to criticize game music when the mixing and its components are of higher quality.

SC: Do you think there are any areas of game music that are not evolving or heading down the right path?

JK: Hmm. I don't think it's heading down the wrong path, I think it's been heading down the wrong path for the last 10 years. I mean that's just my opinion. People are not looking for that original unique score. People in film are looking for that. When you're involved with an independent movie, you're really encouraged to come up with something unique that will make the movie stand out more. In games, people really haven't figured this out yet and maybe they will, maybe they won't. For now maybe it's because the film director is a very creative person and that influences the composers that he hires. Some of the people who hire composers in the game industry are not very creative people, so they look for what they already know and they look for what they know works. So if it worked in the sequel, why not hire the same people for the 3rd one? Even though it didn't get any awards or gather any talk. It's a very safe "Oh, lets just use the same people, this and that." It's very hard to break in and explain to people that there is room for innovation. Innovation is a very important word because games are a very innovative form of entertainment today, so why isn't the music as innovative? And the music is not, it is totally in the background. People might be paying more attention to it early on, but I feel they still don't make the right decisions hiring the music and getting the right music in there. When you look at graphics and sound effects – sound effects are all in 5.1 and have some of the most innovative sound out there. It'll surpass 5.1 when the next consoles come out in a year or two. It'll move beyond film and DVD. It will be moving forward in all of the departments so we really have to get there with the music as well.

SC: Is there any specific genre of game or film that you find yourself drawn to when writing a score?

JK: It all depends on the project and what it requires. I tend to just embrace the project I'm working on. Obviously if it's an endeavor I feel I'm not suited for, then I'm not going to take on that assignment. But once I take on a project, the musical style to work with inspires me.

SC: If you had a dream project to work on, what would that be for you?

JK: I would like to do a little more producing. I would love to do some more high profile movies.

SC: How many minutes of music do you usually write per game?

JK: Hitman: Contracts was more than 90 minutes, Freedom Fighters was about 60, Hitman 2 was about 45. Evil Prophecy is probably in the 50 minute range.

SC: Do you have any advice for people getting into the industry that you're working in whether it is game music, film music or even electronic music?

JK: I don't know if I have any advice, but I can say that game music has become as competitive as film music these days and has surpassed TV as far as popularity. It's difficult to enter the industry, so it's really quite a challenge. You have to have some credits before you start approaching companies if you want them to listen to your music. My advice is to make sure that your music rocks before you send it off, and invest time on it before you send it out. I spent many years writing music before I even dared to get my music in a game. I spent 5 years just writing songs before I got my first track in a game and now 12 years later I'm still practicing so it's very competitive. It's better to have something going on the side where you can just come home and write music and keep doing that for a while until your music style starts to come together. There is no way you can rush your own unique music style. If you really want to do it the right way, it's about commitment. Then you'll see in a few years maybe even 4 years of writing, if you're completely hooked or you're just losing interest in the whole thing. If you're hooked, then you're going to reach a point where your music style is really going to kick ass and then it's about time to start sending it out.

For more information on Jesper Kyd and to check out samples of his work as well as to keep up to date on the projects he's working on past and present, visit his website.

The original soundtrack for Eidos' No.1 selling *Hitman: Contracts* is available through music retailers including Amazon, Best Buy, CDNow, HMV, Musicland, Tower, and Virgin. Other soundtracks by Jesper are available from his website.

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