



# Rob Bridgett

**JOHN BROOMHALL** speaks to Shadow of the Tomb Raider's respected senior audio director about an inspiring new book wrought from decades creating sound, music and dialogue for videogames



/ Rob (centre), at Pinewood mixing Shadow of the Tomb Raider with technical audio director, Frederic Arnaud (L) and re-recording mixer, Adam Scrivener (R)

Rob Bridgett is not only a leading practitioner but also a pioneering thinker concerning the art and craft of creating best of breed sound, music and dialogue for games. Nowhere is this clearer than in the pages of *Leading With Sound*, a new book that brings together learnings and discoveries drawn from an impressive career whose results literally speak for themselves. It is to my mind a coherent and cohesive tome of game audio thoughtfulness which I rather wish had been available when I started my own journey in videogames — a point I put to Rob...

"Me too! I wish I'd read it twenty years ago. I have an old 1980s telephone here — maybe I can call myself in the past and say 'hey, I think I know what to do now!' It's a handbook for my own work, always on my desk, a convenient reference — and a potentially useful weapon."

## What's your motivation for writing about game audio and why this particular book?

I've always found it cathartic to write about my game development experiences either afterwards or during them. It usually starts off really negative — 'the way we're doing this is just terrible, it's broken'. Then re-reading, I realise I can propose a solution instead of moaning! Something actionable and positive for next time...

The overall shape of my new book was informed by two events in 2019 — first was the Develop Conference audio keynote, which got me thinking about the big picture perspective of the industry. Second, was the *Leading With*

Sound conference in Copenhagen, where my focus was looking towards a practical application of what's possible in pre-production and concept phases to involve sound effectively.

The book is really about this idea of a migration of audio from post-production to pre-production, concept and production — and what you can do there — what's our role in the places we're not used to being in? We know what the post thing should look like. That's what we're taught, what we read about and what we see in those manicured behind-the-scenes videos — but, in reality, it's often chaotic with lots of things going wrong. Weird decisions may be forced on you because of some earlier decision during concept or pre-production, often made without thought as to how it might affect sound.

When you've been through that pain a few times, you start thinking about root cause analysis — why does this keep happening? It's less about technology or the time you have — though they can be issues — it's usually due to a creative decision, or assumption, made deep in the past. Hence the 1980s phone on my desk so I can call myself in the past from the future and say 'no no, you've got to plan this now!' It turns out there are more things for you to do in pre-production and concept phases than it's possible to put in a book actually — I've just scratched the surface.

**Your book speaks to a truly creative and collaborative role for sound. Maybe someone who's not studied film sound like yourself might see their mission as just bringing game worlds to life in a literal, realistic way. Perhaps this book will expand horizons around story-telling sound...**

I hope so. At the concept phase other departments are drinking in ideas from film — and also now TV — like never before. They're putting these ideas together as a way to explore the game idea, the game world, the tone — but this is generally only happening in a visual realm. If I say 'concept' you automatically think of sketch artwork — beautifully rendered, non-videogame imagery. It doesn't look like a game, it looks like concept art for a movie. You see the world and the character; you get a sense of the mood via, say, dramatic lighting. There's a lot of storytelling in those concept images. Immediately, that's an opportunity for sound to come in and explore what's in that image, in that frame — but pretty soon you start to go wider and put in sounds for unseen things that aren't visually explicit — like ambiences. Take a sci-fi image: there are one or two spaceships flying by, but then there's this other stuff implied, happening around them. So you fill out the sound outside the frame. You can do so much with tone and point of view and scale. You're having conversations with other departments and one or two elements may ignite further discussion and might give the creative director a completely new angle.

You're opening doors for ideas and feelings. The book is trying to explore and encourage more involvement for sound in these areas.

**Do you take inspiration from other departments' modus operandi?**

Yes. Take the UX (User Experience) department — they seem to have a developed design language (which is where I stole the phrase 'low fidelity prototype'). They're often working in a 'sketch mode' — getting something like a game menu system on screen very quickly to test the flow. They won't start polishing it (which, in sound, we tend to start

into immediately), they'll just test functionality. Audio can come in and follow suit in a functionality-only mode experimenting alongside them with sound triggering — working in that low-fidelity prototype mode — knowing we can freely throw sound away — it's not being judged as 'final'.

My sound designers need to know what expected level of quality they're working in at any time — be it 'L1' — this throwaway 'quick and dirty' sound design mode — which won't be reviewed in super detail (I'm just checking if the appropriate feedback's there and if the trigger point's correct, and timing good). Then ▶

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- Luca Pretolesi - Producer/Mixing/Mastering Engineer (Diplo/Major Lazer, Snoop Lion, Steve Aoki)

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/ Mixing *Scarface* — *The World is Yours* at Skywalker Sound in California, one of the first games to utilise such a prestige facility for its sound mix

— we can move to 'L2' and put in some IP-specific identity for sounds, so they really feel like they fit the project. As we move on, 'L3' is about emotion and 'L4' is our final production quality. With these L-Levels, people understand my expectations... I used to start on a project trying to make final sounds right away — to make it sound really good, do all the feedback stuff, have all the emotion and identity — on my first pass (laughs). That's a really big ask, and a big risk actually — too much pressure at the wrong time. It's simply not how other departments work.

**Please can you give an overview of the book?**

Structurally, I've approached the topic of game audio in four food groups: Sound, Music, Dialogue and Mix. I think Mix has often been subject to a minor, last-minute, 'games mix themselves' kind of thought process. Dedicating a chunky chapter to it seemed really important, especially as it affects the discussion of all the other groups and how they interrelate. I start each chapter questioning why we even need that chapter, exploring its purpose and meaning, then going on to consider where and how you can involve it at those early project stages. And also how to keep audio visible to the entire team. Sound is invisible — no-one can see it on screen — often sound designers are 'invisible' because they're locked away in a recording studio — we have to address that invisibility.

**You said Mix is very important — can you enlarge on your approach?**

Yeah, the mix stuff is so fundamental that the first thing I plan is the end of the project, discussing a final mix phase with producers — because nobody's putting that on an Excel sheet on Day 1. However, project managers need to recognise that the animation department can't stop working on the same

“ I think the game industry wants to embrace this entertainment-driven mindset rather than software-driven — focusing on the player and audience experience ”

day the sound department has to stop. There's a dependency logic between disciplines that needs emphasis. Fortunately, producers are great at seeing logic so once you get into the topic, it can be quite easy to get some final mix space blocked out. This logic can then be repeated for other major milestone deliveries, albeit with shorter timescales. Once that thinking is inherited as part of the project's planning DNA I can stop worrying about it and start engaging with all the formative ideas the creative director wants to work on.

But also mix is an important factor each and every day. It's kind of everything we talk about. 'What's the most important thing here — what does the player need to hear?' as well as 'what emotion should they feel?' Typically every conversation centres on that question: what's important? And that translates directly to a mix decision at some point. If I can answer that question — what's the most important sound thing for any given game moment — we have our mix!

**How does that relate to the overall dynamics of the player's experience and the story arc? You plan that very carefully right? There are graphs...**

Yeah, plotting intensity curves allows everyone to see the dynamic and get on the same page. As soon as you've got a story and overall shape on paper, you can plot all your main

narrative points, throw some numbers in and create a graph — a tension, or intensity curve. Then you start to intuitively make a good dynamic shape. You'll be thinking — if this intense combat beat here should feel 'ten', then the thing immediately before should be a three or two — so do we insert a small new story beat there that gets us to that point before we hit the audience with the most intense thing they've heard so far? You'll start to see problems where there's a nine and a ten and another ten — you can literally see that it's going to feel really flat as an experience. This creates talking points that probably wouldn't arise with just everyone working on their own corner. Considering that flow, that dynamic shape, is really useful for everyone — moments of stillness leading to really intense life or death crises. It's less about audio dynamics — it's the dynamics of the experience, and the sound and mix will dramatically help communicate that shape.

**You were one of the first to take a final game mix to a prestigious external facility — Scarface at Skywalker Sound and later Tomb Raider at Pinewood Studios. What have you learned from those experiences?**

Going from a software development environment where you're discussing floating-point values and scripting logic into an entertainment-focused environment where

post-production mixers are talking about emotion and impact and POV is an evolutionary leap for most game sound teams. You're not making software now — you're focusing on what's on the screen and its entertainment value. Your mentality shifts to extreme polishing, ensuring all transitions are really smooth and levels in line with other entertainment media. Plus you have the value of a trusted, objective set of ears to help you across the finish line.

Just being in those kinds of environments where blockbuster movies are mixed — these hallowed atmospheres where sound and image are taken extremely seriously — is sometimes enough to make you question things you've put on screen. I think the game industry wants to embrace this entertainment-driven mindset rather than software-driven — focusing on the player and audience experience. In reality, I think we've always been entertainment, we just haven't realised it because we've been busy making software.

#### **In the book, you talk about a psychological approach to sound categorisation...**


Yes, because we tend to think about sound in production-focused categories — music, foley, dialogue — whereas, again, I think the audience experience and perception is very different. They don't hear in those categories. There are many things you can do to access the game character's POV through sound — there's this line between imaginary sound events or filtered through a character's psychological perception versus sounds that are just objectively happening in the world. Very few sounds I put in a game these days are purely objective sounds, experienced by a microphone. They're always exaggerated slightly, or larger, or closer, or denser than they would appear in real life. An adjective-led approach is at work in almost all sound design. Take something simple like a door opening sound — it could be a slow terrifying door open, or one that's unnaturally quiet, strange and mysterious...

And it's not just about what you see directly in front of you — it's what you hear slightly off-screen, or just beyond in the next neighbourhood or in the far distance. The further away the sounds are, the more imaginary and psychological in nature they become — and the more interpretation the character applies to them. You can mix in all kinds of weird stuff with off-screen sound to create an emotion or ambiguity by subliminally creating questions and uncertainty for the player.

#### **Hopefully, your book will encourage people to explore that potential for sound much more in games. So who should read it?**

I feel there's a wide audience for the book — it's not limited to game sound designers, composers, dialogue mixers — it's written in a non-technical way which I hope is accessible to sound people from film — or tomorrow's game designers, producers, directors — who are in school right now, but will become the big names of the future. I think it's useful for them to be aware of these opportunities for sound and be inspired to reflect more on how it can help breathe life into projects and ideas. That's how I see it all — breathing life into, and illuminating ideas which a visionary person has had; putting them on screen — and that's as much about sound as visuals. In fact, I will only review sound that's 'on screen' — if it's on your computer or not checked into the latest game build, it doesn't exist as far as I'm concerned. We need to react to everything in context.

#### **Ultimately what would you say you're trying to achieve with sound in games?**

There are three things at play. Sound is performing a ludic role (communicating gameplay information), a story-telling role and a world-building role. All sound is information in an emotional wrapper. As a player, you want a world that feels convincing and compelling, one you want to spend time exploring, a story that compels you to move forward, and all the right information delivered at the right time. This combination is an amazing one that only games provide. As collaborative game developers, delivering information, storytelling and world-building is essentially what we're doing — in some ways, like creatives in any other entertainment arena. It's just the way we do that is through interactive, narrative worlds that put the player in the driving seat. 



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