



Increased Creativity With Wwise

By Alexandra Pasian

Next Level Games strives for maximum creativity in everything they do. Adopting Wwise for their development pipeline helps them create sophisticated game audio across all platforms.

Next Level Games (NLG) in Vancouver, Canada, is not your average game studio. Founded in 2002, NLG strives to bring together top-notch talent in a creative environment that values a balance between work and life. This equation seems to be working extremely well for them. Recently, BC Business rated NLG the best place to work in the "over 100 employees" category and Canada's Top 100 Employers has included them in the list for the past two years.

In addition to being recognized for the way they work, NLG is also getting a lot of attention for the work they produce. This year, they were nominated for two Canadian New Media Awards. The first was for Excellence in Children's Entertainment, and the second, for Excellence in Gaming, they won with *Mario Strikers Charged*.

To achieve this level of success, NLG doesn't always follow the conventional wisdom. In an industry where "thinking outside the box" can be little more than a buzz word, NLG is doing just that. For example, in 2005, they hired two Audio Directors—Chad York and Alex MacFarlane—neither of whom had any prior game development experience.

York began his career in music production working on albums for local bands and then moved into creating audio for TV and Film. By the time he came to NLG, he had worked with Nike, Disney, Sony and Apple. MacFarlane, on the other hand, ran his own production company and taught Sound Design at the Vancouver Film School.

"They have a different philosophy about how to run their leadership group here," says York. "They decided to look outside the industry to change how their audio production was running."

According to MacFarlane, "It was a very gutsy move hiring people who had no gaming experience, but NLG wanted people without preconceived ideas on how audio should be done. The philosophy here is that you hire good people and let them figure it out", a philosophy that seems to be working.

Adopting Wwise for the NLG Pipeline

Both York and MacFarlane are tasked with overseeing every facet of the audio production on NLG's projects. They help develop the studio's global audio technology vision and implement its long term plans.

"The interactive music side was a real draw as well as the real-time connectivity. But ultimately, Wwise speaks for itself. What Wwise does, sells it."

—Chad York, Audio Director, Next Level Games

One of the first things that York and MacFarlane did once they got their bearings was to look at the audio tools being used at NLG. After working on a project using proprietary tools and conducting a post-mortem, the pair decided to investigate other possibilities. Says York, "We spent some time evaluating our development costs and how quickly features were coming together

and made a case regarding building in-house tools versus using a 3rd party solution."

"Wwise is more intuitive than the other solutions we looked at."

— *Alex MacFarlane, Audio Director, Next Level Games*

After weighing all of their options, the team at NLG decided to adopt Wwise as their audio pipeline solution. According to MacFarlane, "We liked the way things work in Wwise. We liked the localization and the way their interactive music system was set up. It's all very logical and the way we expected it to be. Wwise is more intuitive than the other solutions we looked at."

York agrees "The interactive music side was a real draw as well as the real-time connectivity. But ultimately, Wwise speaks for itself. What Wwise does, sells it."

The Importance of Sophisticated Audio at NLG

At any given time, NLG is working on three productions with two in full swing and another in development or about to be published. The studio is structured like a film or ad agency with game, art, audio, and tech directors dedicated to each project. Both York and MacFarlane head up their own teams, which include sound designers, contract composers and coders who all work on separate projects.

"Clearly, audio has a huge role in game development," says York. "A lot of feedback on any game comes from the audio side, even if it's subconscious. When audio isn't noticed, that is when it is doing its best work. You can not quantify it. It's a collaborative process on how to get the user to understand and be immersed in the environment."

And NLG takes its immersive environments seriously. According to MacFarlane, "Because audio is held in the same regard as art and tech at NLG, it is considered at inception and we're involved from the beginning of the game."

Says York, "I like the fact that I am on equal footing with the other directors. Of course, the game director has the final say, but, to a large degree, it is the quorum that solves any issues here."

Using Wwise to Develop for the Wii

York is currently directing audio on a Nintendo project for the Wii. He says, "I like to focus on the project instead of the technology. You can always find ways to make the important things fit, and I like the fact that Wwise allows us to work on the design without working on integration."

"Using Wwise makes it easy for us to add Wii-specific sounds. It is a lot easier for us to add sounds separately to each specific platform."

— *Liam Wong, Sound Designer, Next Level Games*

Liam Wong, a Sound Designer at Next Level Games, finds developing for the Wii to be quite different than developing for other next-gen platforms. As Wong explains, "It is different in that we have different constraints and there are a lot more resources for other platforms. We also have to keep our memory budget in mind all the time."

Working with Wwise definitely helps the team manage these constraints. Says MacFarlane, "One of the nice things about Wwise is that it is pretty easy to scale down your content from the next-gen consoles to the Wii. Wwise gives you good features for lowering sample rates, changing audio compressions, and lowering variations in sounds."

And, adds Wong, "Using Wwise makes it easy for us to add Wii-specific sounds. It is a lot easier for us to add sounds separately to each specific platform."

Wwise for WiiWare

MacFarlane also appreciates what Wwise allows him to do on his WiiWare titles. WiiWare are downloadable games and applications for the Wii that are limited to 40 mega bites each. For most development studios, getting everything down to that size means sacrificing audio, among other things. But not at NLG.

For one of the titles that MacFarlane is working on, he and his team have been able to get 6 music tracks that are all stereo at 32 Khz into the game. The average length of each track is two minutes, and the main theme is 60 seconds. In addition, they have lots of effects and even some ambient sounds.

Says MacFarlane, "There's no way we could have done this without Wwise. It would have been low-sample



rate mono. And not only were we able to get so much audio into the game, but all the music in the game was performed, meaning real instruments with real musicians. Being able to get all that content into the game is just great."

The Creative Advantage

Beyond what it can do when developing for the Wii, the audio team at NLG also likes the same advantages that other studios have seen when they adopt Wwise. Says Wong, "Working with Wwise has had a big impact on the way the audio teams work at NLG. Since I do both design and implementation I can really see that impact. Working with Wwise changes the relationship I have with the coders and puts more control on my side, which I like. I don't have to go to the coders as often, and turn around is easy."

"Wwise makes it possible to be more creative because you can iterate faster as well as adjust parameters and audition sounds in real-time."

- Alex MacFarlane, Audio Director, Next Level Games

A quick turn around time is key for keeping any team functioning at maximum productivity. Says MacFarlane, "Previously, it took us 4 and a half hours to go through an iteration. Chad and I thought this was insane. I mean why do we want to build out all that crazy infrastructure? It's like making a movie where you have to do all the sound and build Pro-Tools as well. But, with Wwise, some actions take only minutes and others are instantaneous."

But, ultimately, for Next Level Games, it is always about pushing the boundaries of their creativity. Whether they are working to produce short themes for WiiWare or immersive effects for next-gen platforms, NLG is constantly striving to create something new and unique. Working with Wwise is definitely helping there.

Says MacFarlane, "Our goal at NLG is to be as creative as possible. In the past we got to be creative 10% of the time and the technical work made up the remaining 90%. Wwise makes it possible to be more creative because you can iterate faster as well as adjust parameters and audition sounds in real-time."

Thinking outside-the-box never sounded so good.

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