

IGM Interviews – John Broomhall (Transport Tycoon)

VINNY PARISI on August 9, 2014 at 8:00 pm



If you were a PC gamer in the 90's, even if you weren't a fan of the various simulation games available at the time, odds are you were consciously aware of a game called *Transport Tycoon*. Created by Chris Sawyer, whose name will also ring a bell for his other *Rollercoaster Tycoon* part of the series, the original *Transport Tycoon* went on to be an incredible success. While the business management sim definitely offered a fresh take on game mechanics that set a new bar for others in the genre to follow, another part of that success can be directly attributed to John Broomhall, composer for the *Transport Tycoon* titles. His mix of old-style blues and jazz made for an incredibly ear-catching soundtrack that is, to this day, highly regarded as among the best video game soundtracks of all time.

I had the pleasure of chatting with John to discuss the definitive remake of *Transport Tycoon* – now available for [iOS](#) and [Android](#) – in addition to getting his thoughts on the current state of music in the industry, and how he's changed as a composer over the years since the game's original release. Those with an appreciation or interest in video game music composition won't want to miss this one.

Indie Game Magazine: The music from the original *Transport Tycoon* is a mix of blues and jazz. What made you think these two seemingly unfitting styles would mesh so well with a business-sim?

John Broomhall: Great question, but actually I *didn't* know they would mesh so well at the beginning. I can remember my boss appearing at the door with a single floppy disc in his hand, saying – “Install this – you're going to be writing the music for it!” The composition began with the title theme. I both played the game and sat and watched it running in 'attract mode' and a profoundly strong sense of tempo and movement came to me, along with this quirky riff, the one you hear right at the beginning of the game. I instantly thought it was a good hook and an interesting motif and in my head. I was a hearing jazzy, funky vibe that would convey a sense of the game being sophisticated and clever and that this *Transport Tycoon* would be a pretty cool tycoon, so I tried it – and everybody in the office loved it. Then we ran it by Chris Sawyer, the game's genius creator and he liked it too and that title tune is what sent me down the path of jazz. This is the only game I've ever written jazz music for and one of the most enjoyable music projects I ever worked on.

IGM: What was it like coming back to the project after so many years?

John: It was an absolute pleasure and something of a dream come true. In the nineties, I'd spent days on end working with our audio programmer, Andrew Parton, to make the original tunes sound as good as possible on every popular midi sound card of the day. When I wrote the tune really what I heard in my head was real musicians playing all these motifs and riffs and jazz solos. Over the last three or four years, I kind of got my jazz mojo back; brushing up my own piano and organ

chops and getting out there to play live music at every opportunity. I'd actually been wondering if there was some way I could reboot the *Transport Tycoon* music with the latest tech and live players for some time. Maybe even perform some or all of it in live situations, and right around then, this wonderful opportunity to work with Chris again, came up.

IGM: Did remixing the tracks ever feel like playing with fire, or fixing something that wasn't broken? Was there ever any concern about living up to certain expectations after how well received the original game's soundtrack was?

John: I never really thought about it that way, but I am very conscious that there is large amount of established support out there for this music in its original form. There are tons of hacked versions all over YouTube, and videos of people playing the music themselves, or just the bass part, which in some cases must have meant some pretty painstaking learning.

I guess I see 'The 2014 Sessions' as a fulfillment of my original musical intentions and yet, given the rudimentary technology of the time, I'm still proud of the original version. If people want to listen to something like the original version while they play *Transport Tycoon* on their iPad there's no problem with me. Personally, I'll be tapping my foot to the new versions, and I really hope other folks enjoy hearing them as much as I enjoyed making them.

IGM: Were there any tracks that were cut from the original game that have been worked into the remixed tracks in some form or another?

John: Firstly, I should point out that the new versions are not just remixes in the popular sense of the word. They [the remixes] have been re-imagined, rearranged and re-recorded. In some instances, they closely resemble the originals, in others; they definitely feel like a fresh take. The music set incorporated is, to the best of my knowledge, all of the tunes included in the *Transport Tycoon Deluxe* release. The only difference being the arrangement of the title tune from the original game, rather than the one I did for *Transport Tycoon Deluxe*.

IGM: It's been almost twenty years since the original *Transport Tycoon* was released. How have you grown as a composer in that time?

John: The entire face of creating music for games has completely changed, and so you really have to change and grow to keep up with the pace. The original *Transport Tycoon* music was created using what we would now see as very primitive technology. In fact, the technology constraints and issues really inhibited the creative process. At the time, writing music seemed like the easy part, compared to the job of trying to make it sound good on the midi soundcards of the day.

Twenty years ago, I had a hard disc drive of 20 megabytes. Now I have RAM of 64 GIGABYTES! That means you can run extremely powerful software and have something akin to an entire orchestra or an entire jazz/funk/Latin band at your fingertips.

In most cases, technology is no longer constraining composers. In fact, it's enabling creativity; it deeply effects and develops how you go about writing music for games. It means you learn more about musical arrangement, orchestration and what you do in the world of sound design. Back in the day, you couldn't do anything that sounded atmospheric due to its sonics; you had to do it through notation. Today, with virtual synthesizers and effects treatments, you constantly have an extremely powerful 'mood machine' at your disposal.

I think it's been very instructive (sometimes in unexpected ways), to spend so much time as an audio director and interviewing other composers for the magazines I write for every month. It's brilliant to continually get fresh perspectives as you talk to different people about their approach and collaborate on new projects. All this makes you grow as a composer.

IGM: Video games in general have changed a lot over the past two decades. How have your personal methods for composing music changed with them?

John: I touched upon this a bit in the previous question, but one thing I find hasn't really changed is the inspiration that one gets from visuals. It took looking at the game, seeing the game and picking up a vibe from it that inspired the music for *Transport Tycoon*. When I worked on the Xbox One launch title, *Forza Motorsport 5*, as co-composer 20 years later, it was still the same process. Seeing images and footage of the game seems to magically tell you what the music should be or at least,

when you envision your music ideas against the picture, you know very instinctively whether it's right or not.

IGM: There's an argument often made that some of the best music tracks to come out of the early 90's era did so because composers were forced to think outside the box in order to create music within such limited constraints. When listening to current console generation soundtracks, do you ever feel like there's an over-reliance on modern technology stifling the creative process?

John: I do think it's true that the limited hardware and technological constraints of the late 80s and early 90s forced people to think constructively and come up with some very creative solutions and in some cases, iconic video game music. For today's soundtracks, I don't think creativity is stifled by modern technology; I think it's unleashed by it. The danger is putting too much music in a game so that it loses its meaning (of course, this depends a lot on the genre of game).

Cont'd: Ideally, there should be a balance and cohesion of these elements – music is just one part of the overall experience, and as composers we should always remember that. It's all too easy to use the power of music to impose emotion. Sometimes sound design is a more effective sharp tool for storytelling and individual sounds can by-pass the cognitive process and hit you, instantaneously evoking raw emotion.

It has been an honor to have worked for so many years with the British Academy, sitting on the video games committee. As a member, I chaired the Original Music and Audio Achievement Awards. In the process, I have heard some of the world's best video game soundtracks side-by-side. Judging this year's nominees for best original music, the games industry is getting the original score right. There's some fantastic work being done and composer maestro, James Hannigan and I recently co-founded [Game Music Connect](#) specifically to celebrate and explore this wonderful art form and the extraordinary talent behind it.

IGM: You've worked on a number of games across a variety of genres. When tackling a new project, how much do you need to know about a game before getting an idea of where you'd like to take the music?

John: It's difficult to generalize and of course, sometimes things change throughout the course of a project, including the music direction. I think for me, it's all about the function of the music. As I said above, the mood, pace, and meaning of what you're trying to convey. Why is music there in the first place? What will it add? What will it say? So the more you know about the 'why' of music, the better.

IGM: Looking back at the original *Transport Tycoon*, are there any minor details about the soundtrack you wish you could've changed? If so, are those changes reflected in the remixed tracks?

John: For the most part, no, however there were a couple of small details of timing in one or two of the solos in the original I wasn't 100% about. Though you probably have to be a geek to notice them. Naturally, being a geek myself, I have totally corrected them :-)

IGM: Are there any tips you can pass on to aspiring composers, particularly first-time indie studios looking to create soundtracks that gel well with their games?

John: The indie sector provides a fantastic opportunity for established and aspiring composers and sound designers. It was eye-opening to sit next to Daniel Olsen, creator of the music for *DEVICE 6*, at the recent BAFTA Game Awards in London and realize that game was nominated for Audio Achievement alongside the likes of *Tomb Raider* and *The Last of Us*. I think the indie sector represents an opportunity for wonderful creative and artistic expression. My tips for making and integrating music/sound, don't skimp on audio budget, allow plenty of time for good integration and implementation, and bring the composers and sound designers in to discuss the project as early as possible. To aspiring composers – networking online and in-person at indie game events is very important, and you could also come to Game Music Connect for some inspiration!

A very special thanks to John Broomhall for taking the time to speak with me. If you want to keep up with his latest projects and activities, including the aforementioned [Game Music Connect](#), be sure to check out his official [website](#), and Like his [Facebook page](#) as well. For more information about *Transport Tycoon*, you can visit the game's [website](#) and [Facebook page](#).