Ubisoft

The games industry may be looked down on by more traditional markets but the sector's enormous and growing hold on the consumer plus imminent changes in the next generation of games consoles means it has now geared up and is working to high standards. ZENON SCHOEPE visits Paris' finest.

UBISOFT OCCUPIES THE NUMBER 7 slot in the world's games publishers' chart and the French company now employs some 2500 worldwide with operational centres in Montreal, which deals with the American market, and at its headquarters in Paris, which deals with European and Chinese projects. These centres house the company's audio facilities with an SSL Axiom in Montreal and a newly installed SSL C200 with a big Pro Tools rig in Paris.

The company started working in Dolby ProLogic with the launch of its successful Rayman series and was using outside studios for its audio requirements. But changes in work load and ambition gave rise to a desire to build its own multichannel room with an accompanying voice-over booth. Martin Dutasta, head sound engineer for Ubisoft France, describes the control room as his office and is quick to stress the maturity of games sound at Ubisoft and how their skillsets equate to part film mixer, editor, sound designer, recordist and music mixer as well as combining traditional techniques with games specific methods.

'All the music, for example, is mixed in the traditional way in the same way you would for music to picture,' says Martin. 'For ambience we're trying to create a sound field just as normal but for sound effects, well, they're controlled by what the player is doing and they'll be triggered by his actions so it becomes far more complicated.'

Interactivity is what makes a game a game yet it's also what makes the sound man's life demanding and there are also technical constraints, linked to the host console, that dictate how much audio ends up on the finished project. He says the job involves prioritising the importance, and therefore the resolution, of each sound component part to maximise memory usage. It's a process that is not helped by the fact that with certain platforms they only get an absolute idea of their memory allocation until near the end of the project.

By contrast, the choice of the 16-fader, 64-channel C200 was an easy one according to Martin. 'I considered two options,' he says. 'One was software based with a Pro Tools and an Icon and the other was this sort of hardware. The thing here is that we are not a commercial studio, we only work for Ubisoft, so in terms of investment I had to look to the long term — I couldn't say I wanted to buy something and then in three year's say that I needed to change everything. I know that in five years the C200 will still be working, when you take a software based thing you have to change things on a regular basis to keep it current.'

The room was designed and built a few years ago by Souch San Souci of AiA and houses Quested VS 2108 5.1 monitoring and, at the time of the design, had an Amek Big console. Martin says that five years ago they didn't have much idea about the direction to take with monitoring for games and that there weren't many 5.1 mixing rooms in Paris. He adds that people were simply including surrounds and a centre in stereo rooms, which Souch and Martin didn't believe was any sort of solution. As such the control room was built with multichannel in mind from the onset and also handles the company TV ads, game trailers, and internal AV stuff.

It's a comfortable room but then it needs to be because the hours can be long. Martin says they work on the assumption that if a player goes through a game without stopping then they could finish it in 15 to 20 hours. 'If we're composing music for that, we don't want it to be repeated so we do submixes,' he says. 'It's something that is quite specific to video games; the music has to evolve with the action. When we're looping it, say because a fight lasts ten minutes, we won't keep the same minute of music repeating, we do maybe ten versions of each track and each of these tracks can loop with one of the others and during the game that will happen and move from one piece of music to the other.

'In addition to that, if the player gets to a point where there is an element of tension, for example, we try and plan the music to compliment this in a musical way. Put simply, there is music for danger and there is music for when the player does the right thing and that is planned by the composer and by us at the mix and there will be a lot of transitions from, for example, danger to safety. It means that from one title I have to produce ten and I'm editing, remixing, keeping only certain parts of the track, doing some sound design.'

He says that games sound is becoming more complex and that it's something that if done well is largely taken for granted and accepted by the player. This audio complexity has stepped up with increased sophistication of the graphics. 'If I'm putting in a sound effect that was recorded in Foley — like footsteps, for example — and I'm hearing it at 1m or in a cave at 50m you have to give it a real-time treatment.' This, he says, can be part of the initial processing or something that is added during the game play from within the console.

'I'm talking about the highest level console, which is the X-Box, and the next generation of PlayStation and X-Box, which will be out at the end of the year, will be much more sophisticated,' he says. 'At the moment it's quite limited but that's the future and it's why we're already working on this.'

He adds that the current situation is strange because they are working towards platforms that they don't yet know. He puts this in perspective: 'Every three years we have a new platform and a game is created within a year to a year and a half.'

Many still regard games sound as a lot of audio ambition and a lot of skill from the creators but they might still consider a nice big control room set up for 5.1 and a C200 and a big Pro Tools rig as possibly a bit of overkill. 'The ambition of all the major video games publishers is to reach the home theatre level — how people at home get the best reproduction from their movies,' replies Martin. 'That's where we're aiming. We know that in the US, for example, most people who are buying an X-Box are buying a home theatre system at the same time or already have one at home. What we're aiming for is a DVD quality soundtrack that is not film theatre quality but is more adapted to home consumption and that includes Dolby Digital. When I arrived at Ubisoft we were doing music with MIDI files. That's finished now and we're doing surround ambience so when the player turns his head the ambience turns with him and that is calculated in real-time. The time of Pacman sound has long finished! For action games it's now almost like a movie. Some of the games we're doing now have sound effects that were recorded in Soundelux and other companies in LA from weeks of Foley and the music is orchestral. It's great to have a room like this and I'm really pleased with it but it's realistic in terms of what we are aiming for.' ■