



THE AUDIO OF SOUTH PARK™



THE STICK — OF — TRUTH™

JUSTIN BELL
AUDIO DIRECTOR



OBSIDIAN
entertainment

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE
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Welcome!



Who am I?

- Audio Director, Obsidian Entertainment
 - On Stick of Truth I...
 - Managed team of talented and awesome sound designers
 - Sound design, music direction and implementation, (and a very small amount of music writing).
 - Occasional audio liaison between South Park Digital Studios (SPDS) and Obsidian's audio team.

A little back-story

- Four years ago, SP asked us to make an RPG.
 - Matt Stone and Trey Parker wanted a full fledged SP game.
 - They wanted to be involved every step.
 - Intended to be more than just “South Park advisors”.

Trey and Matt



- And they were involved!
 - Wrote hundreds of pages of scripts
 - Delivered thousands of lines of dialog
 - Had final approval over everything in the game
 - Deeply involved every step of the way

Obsidian Entertainment



- Obsidian = RPG game developers.
 - Our role was to advise, interpret, and execute Matt and Trey's vision.
 - Use our experience as a game dev to design, propose, and/or implement gameplay features from prototype to final

Division of Labor



- For sound design, music, and voice over we divided work with SPDS in the following ways...

VO and Narrative



- South Park Studios
 - They did all VO recording and editing
 - Fully staffed in-house audio team
 - Full featured recording facility
 - Contributed some core gameplay and cinematics sound design
 - Matt and Trey had final approval for all audio

Composer



- Jaime Dunlap
 - Been writing music for SP since 2001
 - Incredibly fast and diverse composer
 - Ridiculously hard working
 - Wrote all the music (there's a ton of it)
 - Worked directly with SP on cinematics
 - Worked with Obsidian on gameplay
 - He's here in the audience!

Sound Design and more



Austin Shannon, me, Mikey Dowling
(he's here too), Zac Simon, Randall
Brown

- Obsidian audio team
 - We designed the majority of sounds
 - All the implementation and mixing
 - VO conforming and mastering
 - We had **lots** of freedom to do what we felt was appropriate
 - Matt and Trey were very specific about what they provided feedback for (i.e missing audio, or changes to enhance comedic timing)

South Park - 101



South Park 101



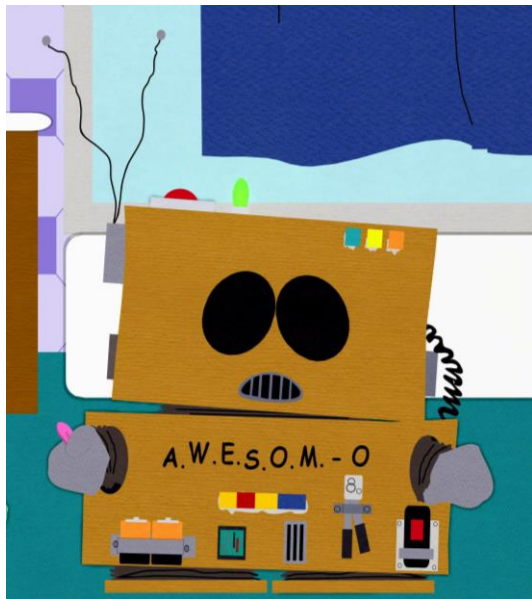
- Storyline is key
 - Episodes are narrative driven
 - Everything is tightly orchestrated

South Park 101 cont.



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- Straight faced satire
 - Not slapstick (important distinction for sound...)
 - The absurd + naïve sincerity

South Park 101



- Storyline is key
 - Episodes are narrative driven
 - Everything is tightly orchestrated
- Straight faced satire
 - Not slapstick (important distinction for sound...)
 - The absurd + naïve sincerity
- Presentation deliberately “crappy”
 - Those are Matt’s own words!
 - It’s a very meticulous crappiness
 - Lots of effort to make it look that way

The Sound of South Park



The Sound of South Park

- VO
 - Synonymous with South Park, they are the same thing
 - Matt and Trey's voices are South Park
- Music
 - Plays a critical role, supports the satire
 - Is always "played straight"
 - i.e. A serious narrative moment will always have serious music
 - Example...



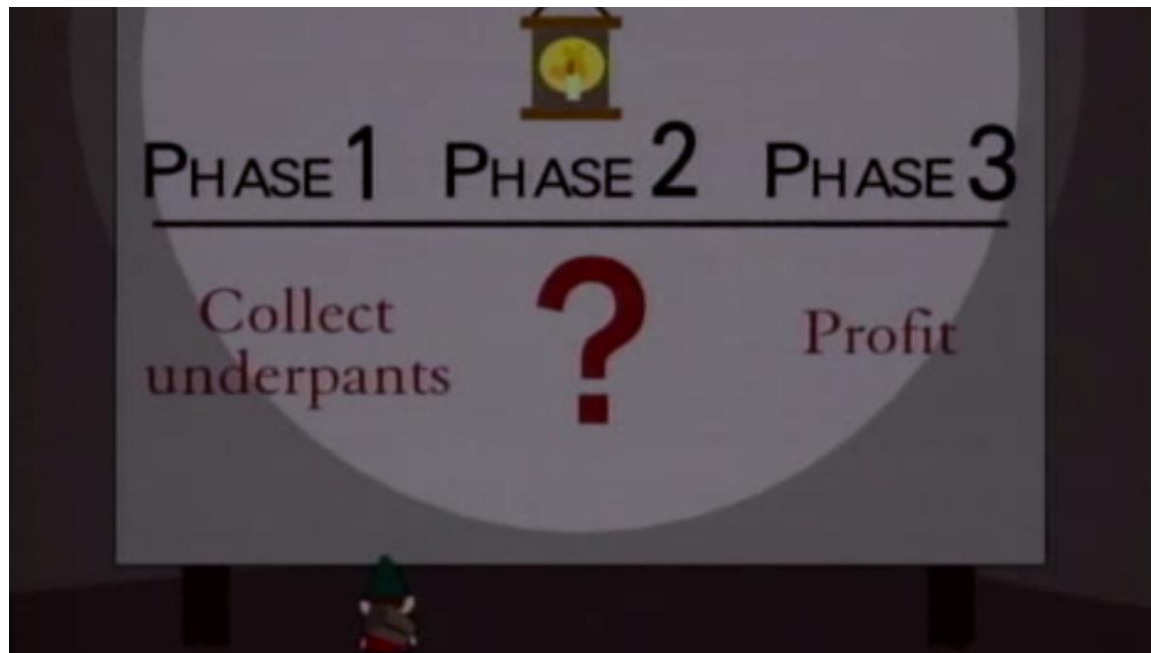
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- SFX
 - Deliberately understated sound effects to match the visuals
 - Not "sound design-y" unless there's a specific need. Example...



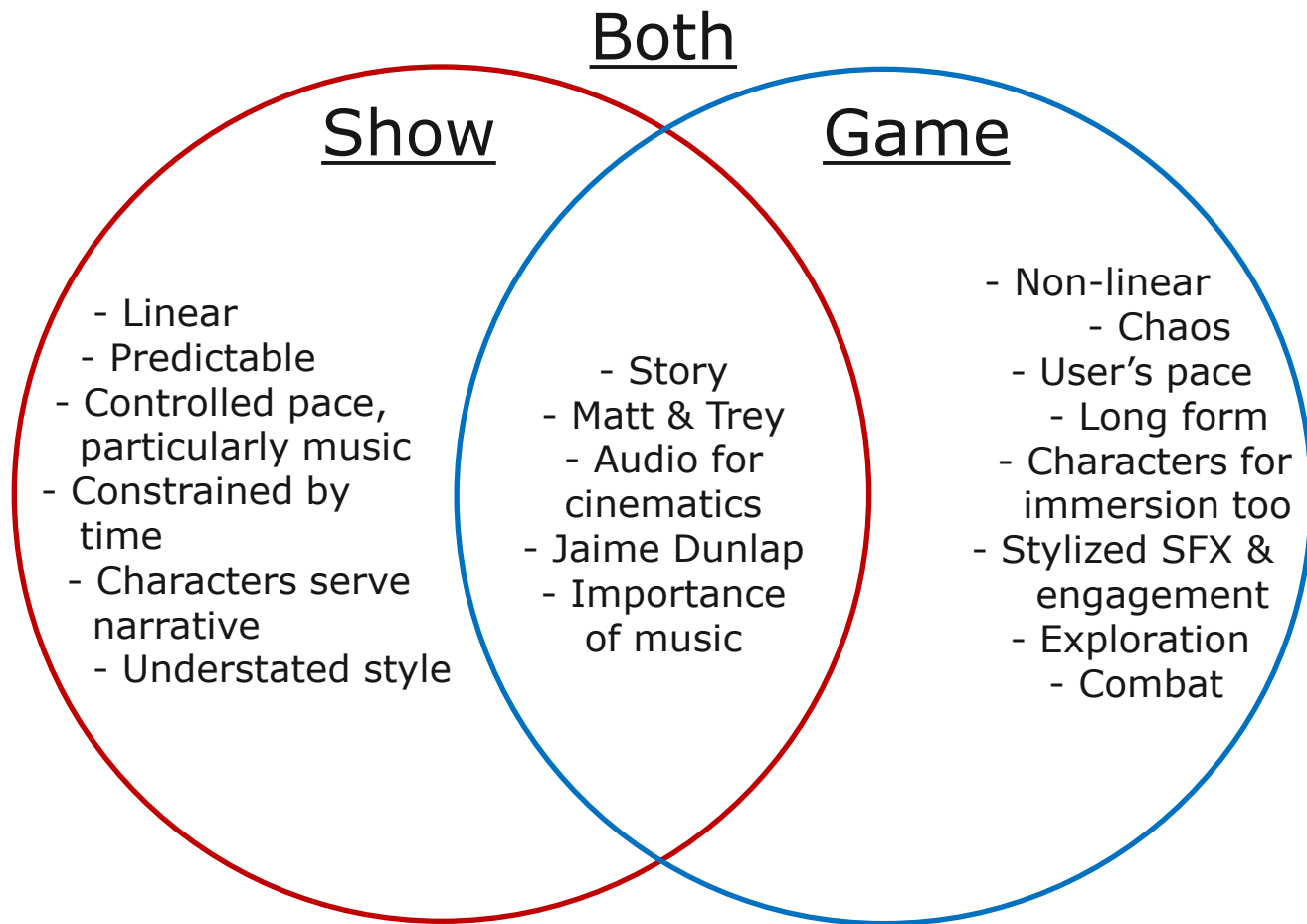
Adaptation



Adaptation

Our goals were to

- Make it sound like the show
- Remain faithful to the show, a love letter to fans
- In the style of SP + Medieval Fantasy Film and RPGs
Skyrim, Lord of the Rings, Game of Thrones
- To understand how, we asked these questions:
Where does the audio of the show and game overlap?
What stays the same?
What needs to adapt?



Adaptation



- As you can see, there are a number of differences to reconcile!
- How we bridged the gap
 - Had to take some liberties to “gamify” elements that had no correlation the show
 - Combat and exploration in particular
 - It was a constant balancing act

Sound Design



Sound Design – Game Objects



Game object test level

- Game Objects were most like the show from a sound design perspective
 - The target was well defined, i.e. that understated sound
 - We had lots of freedom because of that
 - There were a ton of unique game objects in the game, constantly being added

Sound Design – Game Objects



Pile of foley props

- Game Objects were most like the show from a sound design perspective
 - The target was well defined, i.e. that understated sound
 - We had lots of freedom because of that
 - There were a ton of unique game objects in the game, constantly being added
 - We assembled a sizable foley prop library to make that easier
 - Mostly discarded everyday household items and miscellaneous junk

Sound Design - Combat



- Combat was a grey area for us
 - Generally speaking, combat sound effects in the show are mostly understated.

Sound Design - Combat



- Combat was a grey area for us
 - Generally speaking, combat sound effects in the show are mostly understated.
 - This is done to enhance the comedic effect.
 - Here's an example from the show...



Sound Design – Combat cont.



- But will that work for a game?
 - Combat sounds in an RPG like SoT need to provide exciting feedback to the player
 - Is comedic effect alone enough to support a major gameplay feature?

Combat – Prototype



- A push to make combat more rewarding
 - Joe Bullock showed me Persona 4: Arena
 - He liked the satisfying audio feedback
 - We talked about how brawlers and JRPGs use stylized UI and combat sfx

Combat – Prototype cont.



- A push to make combat more rewarding
 - Joe Bullock showed me Persona 4: Arena
 - He liked the satisfying audio feedback
 - We talked about how brawlers and JRPGs use stylized UI and combat sfx
- Randomly focused on 4 such games
 - Persona 4: Arena
 - Soul Calibur IV
 - Final Fantasy XIII
 - Street Fighter IV

Combat – Prototype cont.



- We decided to do a UI and combat sfx prototype in the style of those games
 - I asked Austin Shannon, the Sound Designer who created most of the combat sfx, to do the prototype
 - Here's a video of that...

IN THE STYLE OF



PRE ALPHA FOOTAGE

Combat – Prototype cont.



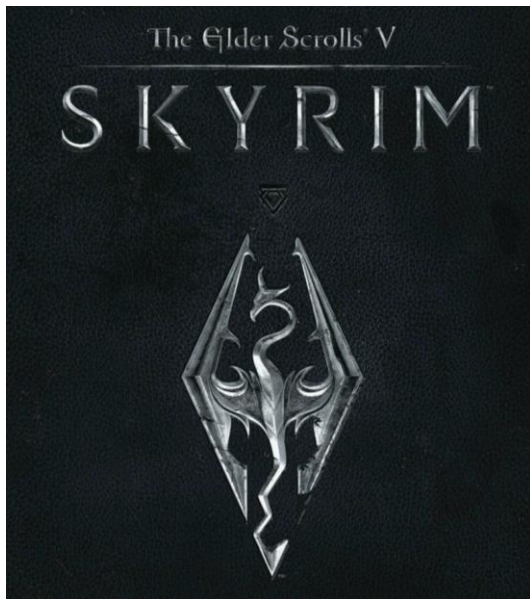
- It was a valuable experiment
- Some elements sounded really cool
- But, didn't have that trademark understated "crappiness"
- Matt and Trey reviewed it, they felt it was too stylized

Combat – Prototype II



- One of the games Matt and Trey referred to a lot was Skyrim

Combat – Prototype II cont.



- One of the games Matt and Trey referred to a lot was TES: V Skyrim
 - To see how that fit, we extracted it's sounds and layered them over a video
 - Sent that to SP for feedback
 - Here's a video of that...

IN THE STYLE OF



The Elder Scrolls® V

SKYRIM™

PRE ALPHA FOOTAGE

Combat – Prototype II cont.



- As with the 1st prototype, they felt it didn't capture the spirit of the show.
 - The weapons & abilities shouldn't sound huge and epic
 - No massive whooshes or gore
 - Should sound like a kid took their spatula from their mom's kitchen.

Combat – Prototype III



- The way they described it, when they want a sound, they record simple foley
 - E.g. if they need a wood impact, they hit two pieces of wood together
 - They asked us if they could try going the complete opposite direction
 - I took a stab at it
 - Went for the crappiest, most understated treatment I could
- Here's a video of that...

IN THE STYLE OF



PRE ALPHA FOOTAGE

Combat – Prototype III cont.



- Turns out they loved it!
 - It was a novel approach, and is kind of funny the first time you hear it
 - More in line with the simple approach of the show
 - We exchanged excitement for humor
 - What wasn't clear is if it could retain that novel quality for the duration of the game

Combat – Prototype IV



- One of the benefits of the production cycle is iteration. Time often shows you the right path...
- It began to feel like the understated sfx didn't have the impact we desired
- We proposed an new solution that split the difference between all of the prototypes
- The objective was to make combat feel exciting and engaging again
- Here's what we proposed

IN THE STYLE OF

SOUTH PARK™

THE STICK

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Combat – Prototype IV cont.



- They like that even better! That's what we shipped the game with.
- The end result is less like a kid with his/her spatula, and more like a kid pretending the spatula is a flaming sword
- That concept works well with the premise behind SoT

Music



Music - Exploration



- The player spends a lot of time exploring environments.
 - There's no correlation to this in the show
 - Music from the show always serves a specific narrative purpose
 - There might not be a narrative purpose when exploring in the game
 - The challenge was to find music that implied an over arching narrative...
 - ...while also sounding like it came from an episode

Music - Exploration cont.



- The most important exploration cue was for the “hub” (the hub is the town of SP)
 - The player spends a lot of time here
 - Which means it’s music will be heard a lot!
 - A reactive score wasn’t possible due to scheduling constraints
 - So the music needed to be a loop
 - I wanted to try and avoid the pitfalls of loops considering how much it would be heard

Exploration – Hub I



- Jaime and I worked together on a few approaches to this cue before finding “the one”
 - We started working on the hub back when the storyline was still in development
 - The references to Skyrim weren’t quite solidified yet
 - I asked Jaime to just dive in so that we could have a place to start
 - Here is the first version of the hub music

HUB I

PRE ALPHA FOOTAGE

Exploration – Hub I cont.



- It's a good piece of music, and it flows well with the movement of the player
 - The cue ended up being about 1.5 minutes long
 - When it looped endlessly though, it had a breathless and predictable quality that I felt might not hold up after hours of listening

Exploration – Hub II



- For the next version, we tried a more specific approach
 - The idea was to create a loop with a long “listening lifespan”
 - Limit the musical dynamic range (no fff)
 - Keep the ensemble small
 - Lots of negative space between phrases
 - Extend the length to around 7 minutes, looping “sweet spot”
 - For style, we settled on a LoTR Shire kind of vibe.
 - Here’s the cue in action...

HUB II

PRE ALPHA FOOTAGE

Exploration – Hub II cont.



- Turned out pretty awesome!
 - Because of the length, looping didn't matter.
 - The player would discover something new with each listen.
 - Negative space alleviated the breathlessness of the previous version
 - It was on the whimsical side, and had a light hearted quality
 - Which leads us to...

Exploration – Hub III



- Around this time Matt and Trey started to focus on a darker, Skyrim inspired tone
 - The new cue, while good, didn't fit the narrative as well
 - They asked Jaime to write a new cue based around Cartman chanting in Latin.
 - In the game Cartman is the puppet-master, and this reflects that
 - Here's a video of that cue...

HUB III

PRE ALPHA FOOTAGE

Exploration – Hub III cont.



- As you can hear, it's much darker than the second version
 - I'll admit I was partial to the "shire" version, but Matt and Trey had the right instincts here
 - SP is their baby, they know it better than anyone
 - This cue was shorter, but Jaime did keep the negative space and small orchestration in mind

Exploration – Conclusion



- I implemented it in a special way to address the shorter length
 - Whenever the music is triggered, it seeks to a different bar each time
 - You only hear the beginning of the cue at the start of the game and when you load a save

Exploration – Conclusion cont.



- The hub went through the most iterations, because it was the most important.
 - Subsequent exploration music maintained the qualities we established in v2
 - They were usually approved without changes

Music – Scripted Moments



- Matt Stone in particular was very keen on having as much of a scripted experience as possible
 - Comedic timing is critical to the show's writing
 - Even though we couldn't choreograph music to that level, there were simple things we could do to imply that
 - So we would change the default exploration music to match the narrative

Music – Scripted Moments cont.



- Quest objectives were often bridged with combat or a cinematic, or both...
 - Combat and cinematics always had unique music
 - It was easy to use those moments to mask transitions when we would shift gears
 - The player could backtrack in a questing area and revisit previous cells
 - So it was critical that the global music for the entire area would update

Music – Scripted Moments cont.



- The player could backtrack in a questing area and revisit previous cells
 - So it was critical that the global music for the entire area to update as well and get tracked for save loading
 - Transitions could happen as many as ten times in a given quest area
 - Onyx has a very simple, but powerful, data driven global variable system
 - This simplified implementation without the need for complicated scripting logic

Voice Over



Voice Over - Rapid Iteration



- SP moves very fast when it comes to VO recording.
 - They can make script modifications, record new VO, and get it into an Avid very fast
 - In other words, they get instant results
 - They would often send us anywhere from 3-6 deliveries a day at the height of production
 - It was quite common for a given conversation to change a number of times before they were done

Voice Over – Rapid Iteration cont.



- It was a bit of culture shock on both sides of the pipeline!
 - We were accustomed to a much longer term schedule
 - Game VO has a longer gestation period...
 - And implementation time is much slower due to implementation and build times.
 - It could be as long as a week before SP could view changes in the build

Voice Over – Updates



- We had to stay organized to keep up
 - If an update come through, the first task for us was to identify what changed
 - Sometimes this was straight forward because a line would change dramatically
 - Other times the changes were subtler. Ex. a line would be the same but the inflection of the line was slightly different
 - It was definitely an adjustment for both sides to adapt to one another's pace

Thanks, you guys. I'm going home...



Justin Bell

jbell@obsidian.net