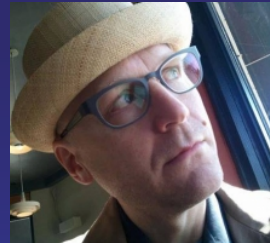# GDC

Relative Perfection:

Finding the Balance Between Flawed and Flawless

Or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Embrace Imperfection

Neal Acree   Penka Kouneva   Guy Whitmore   Austin Wintory   John Robert Matz
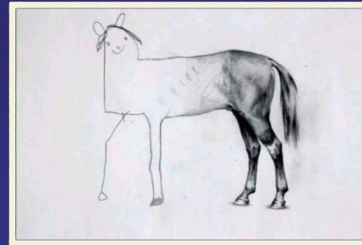Moderator

Friday, March 22nd - 10:00am - Room 3002, West Hall

NEAL ACREE

Overwatch, World of Warcraft, Diablo III

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PENKA KOUNEVA

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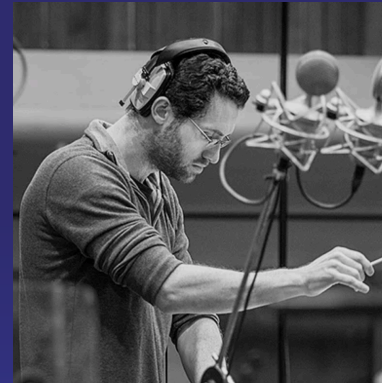
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Austin was kind enough to get us his answers, so for a few questions, I'll be embodying our missing friend and reading some of his responses.

Making the most of what you've got, right?
Embodying… imperfection.

What Is Perfection?

"The condition, state, or quality of being free or as free as possible from all flaws or defects."

"The action or process of improving something until it is faultless or as faultless as possible."

Dictionary definition time!

What is Perfection to YOU?

(And does it really exist?)

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(Ex. Panelist definitions of perfection, in relation to art and otherwise.)

Neal: I think there is such thing as a "perfect score" in that from the listener's perspective it is utterly flawless. But I imagine if we were to look under the hood and see how the work came into being we would see that there was plenty of imperfection at play. I also think our own views of perfection change over time, even when evaluating earlier work that we thought was as close to perfect as we could get it.

Guy: Perfection is an ideal that we set out to attain. It's a 'North Star' guiding a creative endeavour; that enigmatic sound we have in our head, an indescribable emotion we wish to evoke in melody, a state of being we wish to share with others. To know that absolute perfection is unattainable is true wisdom. To utilize that perfect ideal to lead our creative decisions leads to the fruition of ideas/music that communicate that ideal.

Penka: the most gratifying aspects of a game score are mastery of the craft (melody, chords, programming, orchestration - all done masterfully and not in a mediocre way).

Then, imagination. I am impressed by imaginative, intellectually curious approach.

Then, emotional scope. Music that has limited emotions is not very interesting for me. Music that stirs my soul is gratifying. I listen to one soundtrack mostly from film but also from games every morning, because my music editor husband needs to listen, for his job. Most of the music becomes endless droning or brutal action soundtracks. Occasionally, something exceptional rises above the noise.

Austin: I honestly don't have much to add to particularly Guy's comments. I see 'perfection' as an unattainable ideal, but in practice, actual perfection would be immensely boring. The happy accidents that arise from 'imperfection' are what characterize finished products in often deeply meaningful ways. And I don't just mean charming artifacts, but the things that remind us that fallible, fellow human beings came together and did something and now we're all sharing in it. "Perfection" often becomes synonymous with robotic and sterile, and removes that essential humanity.

When is Perfection not Practical?

(How much imperfection is acceptable?)

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(Ex. When you're out of budget, time, or talent, finding an acceptable level of imperfection that's satisfactory first to the client and then to you is key. Sometimes you cut corners, but make sure they're not the ones that show.)

Neal: I will mention that I am a perfectionist and that I lose a lot of sleep trying to make things perfect that nobody will ever hear. I'll invest my own money to make it the best it can be but it can always be better. At the end of the day though we are only human.

Guy: Perfectionism (of which I'm a card-carrying member) goes awry when we mistake 'perfect' with 'flawless'. It's easy to get to a point where a piece is conveying your ideas extremely well, only to iron out the wrinkles in an effort to make it flawless, when you actually ironed out much of the raw emotion. Though keeping track of the initial ideal, on an emotional level, is always practical and pragmatic, as opposed to having a flawless musical ideal in mind, which often leads to a perfectly generic piece of milk toast.

Penka: Earlier in my career scoring indie horror movies and TV movies, I was adding a lot of subtlety in the texture that no one would ever hear in the final mix. But my "big gestures" were not strong (I mean, themes for the characters, themes for the big action moments.) After listening to a few of my movies on TV and going to a few screenings with bad audio system, I understood that I should not waste my time with details but instead should train myself to write great themes. So I began releasing my stand-alone CDs in-between jobs. They were my training ground to become a better composer. Most definitely,, becoming a game composer made me a better composer. It forced me to write greater themes, to create more "distinct" musical style to match the game aesthetics. To more carefully calibrate the level of intensity so it's perfect for the gaming level. I'm forever super-grateful for becoming a game composer, because it definitely elevated my skills to a whole new level. So my quest for perfection meant that I had to become a better composer and prioritize what is more important in a film or game score.

Austin: Penka's comments are especially salient. It's easy to lose focus on what sort of perfectionism matters most. I would rather try and write the perfect melody, recorded in a messy and rushed way, than a squeaky-clean recording of subpar writing.

How do you teach yourself to be OK with flaws?

(Techniques for training yourself to move forward and FINISH.)

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(Ex. "Dailies": set a short timer, load a template and challenge yourself to create a "complete" piece of music; forcing yourself to *finish* a thing, no matter how rough it is.)

Neal: Running out of time is the best way to be okay with flaws though even that doesn't always do it for me.

Guy: One of my mottos is "Creativity is knowing which mistakes to keep!", so flaws are truly important to the creative process. Without them, we'd all be writing the same things over and over. For me it becomes about whether the flaw helps convey the emotion and spirit I'm after. 'A little rough around the edges' can be a plus depending on the project. It's just knowing which edges to smooth, and which to let go of.

Penka: I'm not OK with my own flaws. I'm always pushing myself to learn more and be a better composer. I revise like crazy, until the end. Sometimes I keep flaws if they are adding a unique flavor.

Austin: One time my father, while playing Pictionary with my mother, was frustrated at her paralysis of how to draw what she saw on the card. He shouted "literally draw ANYTHING." I think that holds for our work. Having some on "paper" that is flawed and needing revision is vastly easier to deal with than waiting until you have that perfect idea in your head. That can be paralyzing.

How do you escape Writer's Block?

(O, Lady Muse, where art thou?)

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(Ex. Take a break, go on a walk, listen to something else, wash the dishes, scrap the last phrase/section and start anew.)

Neal: I have a lot of thoughts on this. I'm actually writing a book on the subject right now. As we get closer to the panel time I can try to find a concise way of presenting that that fits into the context of the panel. Maybe we could just put a card up on the screen that has "10 tips" or something like that.

Guy: My 'Music Diary' is one method I use (though inconsistently) to keep ideas flowing and to write in styles that aren't tied to a commercial project. With those I give myself a timeline of one or two hours to complete, and let it be rough, yet a complete musical thought, like a diary entry. I post many of those on FB in order to help me get over myself and my fears of showing work that is less than perfect :)

Penka: I take a break, go for a walk. Then listen to other music, usually something sublime that makes me weep. Yes, I am pretty merciless with my material and could erase a whole section, lines, themes, sometimes even the entire piece. I also read about the character I am scoring, go back to notes from production meetings, then listen to some more music from the same genre. Listening is "research" and my favorite, most inspiring phase of the job. Then after "research" I go back to writing again. If I am working on a demo and it's due in 2 days I don't have the luxury to be "blocked." I have one day for composing the themes and a 2nd day for programming, orchestrating and mixing. I have found that after a hiatus in composing it takes me a few days to be back in shape. I think creativity is a muscle that needs to be used consistently. The most difficult times are when I first begin sequencing (after the paper sketches) because everything is so skeletal and crude. I keep pushing by reminding myself how glorious the music will sound when it's all mixed and finished.

Austin: I have never understood or related to the concept of writer's block. If you hone your technique and craft, you can put SOMETHING on paper and then evaluate whether it's good. Plenty of times I've been uninspired and written garbage but that didn't mean I was blocked. It just meant it needed lots of revision or replacement. Accepting that what comes out is deeply flawed is part of that process and essential.

How do you use Imperfection to your advantage?

(Embracing it to enhance the humanity, emotion, or realism of a work.)

(Ex. Playing sampled parts by hand, loosening up your quantization, playing a live instrument, even poorly, to bring life into a track.)

Neal: I can discuss how I use two cc foot pedals (PICTURE!) to control expression in real time. This allows me to play full chords on the keyboard with both hands while simultaneously recording expression. I can discuss how I used to draw in all my midi and record one instrument at a time but Joel Goldsmith talked me into recording midi by hand and with pedals for a more human sound and to save time. I also don't quantize a lot of my midi until it goes to be orchestrated.

Guy: Using techniques that produce chaotic results to compose music or create sounds helps the initial creative phase. Once my Jupiter 6 synth was completely fritzing out, making all sorts of glitchy sounds and unpredictable warbles. I hit record on the DAW, and just improvised for 15 or 20 minutes gathering source. That source was then edited into sample banks and used as the basis for the music I contributed to the Tron 2.0 score.

Austin: There are many practical tips and ideas here but once had a little desktop fan to keep my rig cool (I was in a tiny room with no good AC). I once left it running by mistake during a recording and it added a nice noise floor and room tone. On many projects thereafter, I actually sampled it as room tone and layered it in on purpose just to add that bit of imperfection that live recordings have, and which purely sampled music lacks.

Neal's two-footed expression setup

(Ex. Playing sampled parts by hand, loosening up your quantization, playing a live instrument, even poorly, to bring life into a track.)

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How do you quickly grasp new concepts and learn new skills?

(Always have more than one way to solve a problem; there are no dumb solutions - if it works, it works.)

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(Ex. Always more than one way to solve a problem, "there are no 'dumb' solutions; if it works, it works", watch online tutorials, read blogs, ask your colleagues for help and advice, master new challenges monthly, play games outside your usual expertise, put yourself on a path of constant growth as an artist and professional.)

Neal: YouTube tutorials are the greatest invention since sliced bread and sliced bread is pretty awesome.

Guy: Pick something new and jump in. I'm currently in the middle of an Udemy course learning C# programming because I want more direct control over my music playback in Unity games. I just took on an indie game that's using Unreal Engine and I volunteered to do the audio integration, even though I have no experience with Unreal Audio or Blueprints.

Penka: for every new scoring job I need to quickly learn new skills. Sometimes it's scoring in a genre I haven't scored in a while. Sometimes it's finding a unique and different style. I always push myself to find innovative elements, to be unique, to learn a new approach. I don't like to always use the same bag of tricks. In my own artist albums I'm continually breaking the mold and attempting to surprise my audiences and myself. For instance, after 2 orchestral-hybrid CDs, I went into two different directions - more minimalist electronic (ala The Martian soundtrack) and super-traditional music (ala Schumann, Brahms). My latest album is solo piano fantasias, and my next album will be ambient pulsing electronica ala the 8Dio demos. The games and films I scored in the last 2 years have been extremely diverse - from guitar-based Americana for a Survivor-type reality show, to mystery music for a magic show, to fantasy/crime/horror VR game, to Eastern-flavored, peaceful world-building VR game and so on. The amount of learning done quickly was overwhelming …

Austin: This simply comes down to opening your ears. Always be listening to new music and genres and letting yourself be flypaper to what the world has to teach. Plus collaborations with different musicians from yourself can lead to entirely new ways of thinking. I find it's best to pursue that between the major deadlines, so when the iron strikes, you already have thought about it beforehand.

How do you know when to ask for help?

*(You can't know EVERYTHING;
What do you do when you're not an expert in an area?)*

(Being an expert in every area is impractical; cultivate relationships with people who have different skill sets and approaches and trade advice, feedback, and skills. The game audio community is tremendously supportive.)

Neal: I'm always asking for musician recommendations from colleagues (Including Austin). I also do my best to learn something new from my team (orchestration, mixing, etc) on every project.

Guy: The game audio community is so willing to share and there are so many methods and resources for asking/receiving/giving help and assistance these days. I'm always doing the give/take dance on social media :) The Reaper Slack, Wwise Wizards and Witches, directly reaching out to individuals.

Penka: I always reach out for help with the mixing of a demo, or mixing anything. I always reach out for programming the most innovative, weird, unusual sounds that you hear in my music - the sound-designy stuff. I'd rather pay to a friend who will do an awesome job - and perfect job - rather than struggle with my own imperfection.

Austin: From the start. I don't think it's necessary to have a 'breaking point' wherein passing it demands "now I must call for backup." I love reaching out to folks with questions / thoughts all the time!

How do you avoid spiraling into making "improvements"with diminishing returns?

(Are you SURE you really need to adjust that EQ again?)

(Ex. Adjusting the mix for the 200th time on tired ears, buying new and better sample libraries/gear without mastering your current ones, recording the same lick 50 times and never being satisfied.)

Neal: I tend to stay a bit behind the curve with sample libraries because I think it's more important to be able to use the tools you are most fluent in rather than constantly having to re-adjust to new ones. I can also mention that in Logic there is a "capture last take as recording" key that allows you to record without the pressure of actually being in record.

Guy: Saving session versions as I go allows me to listen back to previous milestones to hear if I've gotten off-track and am losing the integrity of a piece.

Penka: I don't revise ad nauseam. If I've revised something a few times and the client is still not happy, I would offer to compose something better. I usually don't finish projects in the evening. I sleep on them and finish them in the morning.

Austin: deadlines often prevent this for us!

So, when does "Absolute" Perfection Really count?

(Think about how your work affects someone else's work...)

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(Ex. Score prep, click tracks, documentation, in-code notes, file naming conventions, loudness standards - any time something you do affects someone else's work, it *needs* to be perfect.)

Neal: I can talk about the importance of zero mistakes in the final stages of delivery while sharing some really dumb things I did when I was starting out.

Guy: As mentioned, I don't think 'absolute perfection' exists, but there are times when eeking out every once of expression is the right thing to do. Paying excruciating close attention to all the details, particularly when collaborating or handing things off to another team member, is what separates 'excellent' from 'pretty good'.

Penka: deliverables in games or film - they must be perfect.

Setting up my methodology of composing / stems and working with my mixing collaborator,

Setting up the methodology of conforming the film score with multiple new edits (this applies to the cinematics in game)

Basically doing all necessary preemptive strikes to save myself from trouble down the line.

Austin: I don't have anything to add; session prep, music copying/orchestration and final deliverables are absolutely worthwhile uses of 'perfectionism.'

How do you determine when "good enough" *is* actually good enough?

(Is there something more I should do? Who is the arbiter of "good"?
Was this all a terrible mistake?!?)

(Ex. Take a break from writing, switch to a new track, get some distance and listen later with fresh ears, cultivate a support group of composer friends you trust for feedback, and have 1-2 trusted critics willing to provide in-depth listening and critical feedback, especially during tight turnarounds, demos for jobs, etc.)

Neal: I can talk about the fact that music is subjective and ultimately it's up to the client to decide when it's good enough. Sometimes I'll send something I hate and they love it and sometimes it's the opposite. All we can do is our best in the time we are given.

Guy: Time is the X-factor, and the element that forces the composers' hand. Shipping something really good on-time is better (usually) than shipping something a bit closer to perfect a day late. I've often found that a deadline encourages me to try things and techniques I wouldn't have considered had all the time in the world been available.

Penka: for clients - I deliver whatever they want. I revise until they are satisfied. I never question their "requests for revisions" - that would be a waste of my time. Whatever they want, I deliver.

Something on the soundtrack I include my favorite version (with their permission, of course, and I usually present a great justification as to why)
For my own artist projects, I usually get feedback and then approval of my collaborators.

Austin: For me, it never is. But deadlines and the pragmatics of life demand when the cut off must be called. But for me saying "good enough" is proof that it's not. Even if it must be

Thank You!

Neal Acree	Penka Kouneva	Guy Whitmore	Austin Wintory	John Robert Matz
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"If it sounds good, it is good."
- Louis Armstrong

- Thank everyone!
- Roll into Q&A!
- Remind people to fill out their feedback forms!
- Thank everyone again!

Fine.

- Go home!