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Postcard From GDC 2004

Sound Design Methodology of *Medal of Honor*

On Friday afternoon, Eric Kraber, senior audio director of EA Los Angeles, shared his approach in designing the audio for the *Medal of Honor* series (EA Games, www.ea.com).

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The guiding principles. With the involvement of director Steven Spielberg (whose WWII drama *Saving Private Ryan* was the inspiration behind the *MOH* games), Kraber and his team set out to capture a cinematic experience: real, dramatic, heart-wrenching, and abrasive. The goal, said Kraber, was "authenticity, not realism." By that Kraber meant the game was suppose to present "what could have occurred, not what did happen historically." To achieve this, many of the game elements were created from scratch.

Pre-production practices. The *MOH* team decided it was critical to integrate the audio department early on. Kraber and his colleagues used media design documents. Animatics--scenarios animated with line drawings and dramatized with sounds--were effective tools to identify the target audio quality they planned to achieve.

Sound design. The primary goals for sound design were feedback, emotion, and immersion. "You don't want people to feel like they're playing a game," said Kraber; "you want them to feel like they're in that world." Kraber advocated "designing sounds that are recognizable without visual support." It is easy to pass off, for instance, a low-volume explosion as a door-slam if heavily reinforced with visual aids. But high quality sound effect is made of sounds that are recognizable for what they are even when the players' eyes are shut.

Weapon design practices. Kraber and his team paid attention to distinguish the different types of weapons. According to Kraber, sound should indicate the power of the weapon. To accomplish this, the *MOH* audio team worked mostly from authentic sounds--in this case, recorded firing of live ammunition. "Don't over-process," warned Kraber. "Sometimes, less is more."

Ambiance. The atmospheric environmental audio was a blending of long streams, positional loops, and random shots. The ambiance, Kraber reminded the audience, could help expand the environment beyond what was visible on the screen. Ambiance could also be used to foreshadow the things to come. For instance, distant firing of a major weapon could indicate to the players they were approaching their objective.

Voice recording practices. Kraber emphasized the importance of inter-departmental communication. "Create characters, not caricatures," said Kraber. In the making of *MOH*, he occasionally allowed actors to go off the page and improvise based on their memory of the scenario. He also revealed that assembling actors together in the same booth was a more effective method than recording them separately; often, actors could feed off one another when given the opportunity to interact among themselves.



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