

Scoring a film

Music with a job and a stopwatch

Almost everything in the theory packs applies here — melody, harmony, orchestration, form. Two things are new: the music is not the point, and it can be cut; and it has to land on the frame, so the length of every phrase is decided before you write a note.

WHAT A SCORE IS ACTUALLY FOR

Telling you how to feel

OBVIOUS

The same shot of a man walking down a corridor is suspense, comedy or grief depending entirely on what is under it. This is real power and it is easy to overuse: if the acting already carries the feeling, doubling it with music makes the scene smaller, not bigger.

Saying what the picture does not

VALUABLE

Music can tell you that a character is lying, that this place matters, that something is coming. Working *against* the image — a lullaby over violence — is one of the strongest devices available, and it only works if you use it once.

Holding a sequence together

STRUCTURAL

A montage of twelve unrelated shots becomes one idea if a single continuous cue runs under it. Much of a composer's work is not emotional at all — it is making cuts feel intended and giving a scene one shape instead of six.

Identifying

LEITMOTIF

A short theme attached to a person, place or idea, brought back transformed as their situation changes — Wagner's device, adopted wholesale by film. Keep motifs short and interval-led so they survive being played slowly, in the minor, by one horn, or backwards.

HOW THE WORK HAPPENS, IN ORDER

FIRST	THEN	THEN	THEN	LAST
Spotting	Cue sheet	Sketch to mock-up	Orchestration & parts	Record & dub
Composer and director watch the cut and decide where music starts and stops. Everything after depends on it.	Each cue gets a number, start and end timecode, and a note of its job. 1M3 = reel one, music cue three.	Written against picture in a sequencer, then rendered with samples so the director can approve before anyone is paid to play.	The sketch becomes a full score and clean parts — on a large film an orchestrator does this, fast.	Recorded to picture with a click, then balanced against dialogue and effects — where music ends up quieter than you hoped.

The vocabulary, and the craft

Words on the job, rules that hold up

The words below are the ones you will hear in a spotting session and read on a cue sheet — none of them are optional knowledge. The rules beside them are the ones that survive contact with a real mix.

WORDS YOU WILL HEAR ON THE JOB

<i>Diegetic</i>	Music the characters can hear — a radio, a band in the bar. Everything else is non-diegetic.
<i>Temp track</i>	Existing music laid under the edit before you arrive. Useful as a brief, dangerous as a target — you will be asked to sound like it.
<i>Hit · sync point</i>	A frame the music must land on. Three hits in ten seconds is scoring; thirty is cartoon <i>mickey-mousing</i> .
<i>Click track</i>	A metronome in the players' headphones so the recording lines up with picture to the frame.
<i>Stem</i>	The score delivered as separate layers — strings, brass, percussion — so the mixer can rebalance without you.
<i>Source cue</i>	Music written to sound as if it came from the world of the film rather than from the orchestra pit.
<i>Underscore</i>	Quiet, sustained writing designed to sit beneath dialogue without competing with it.

CRAFT RULES THAT HOLD UP

- **Leave the dialogue frequency free.** Speech lives where a viola and a trumpet live — score under it with low strings and high sparse colours, and keep the middle clear.
- **Enter and leave invisibly.** Start a cue under a loud effect or on a cut; end by fading into ambience. Music that announces itself has to justify itself.
- **Pick a tempo that fits the cut.** Find the seconds between the beats you must hit and work the tempo backwards from them, before you write any melody.
- **Silence is a cue.** The strongest moment in most scores is where the music stops. Ask at the spotting session which scenes should have none.
- **Write to be cut.** Scenes get re-edited after you deliver. Repeatable four- and eight-bar units survive that; one unrepeatable forty-second arch does not.

Scoring a game

Never the same length twice

A film is the same length every time you watch it. A game is not — a player may cross a room in eight seconds or forty minutes, may fight or hide, may die and start again. So a game composer writes a system rather than a timeline: a set of parts, and rules for how they combine while somebody plays.

THE THREE TECHNIQUES UNDERNEATH ALMOST EVERYTHING

Looping

The oldest answer: write a passage that joins seamlessly back to its own start and let it run until the situation changes. The craft is all in the join — matching reverb tails, avoiding a resolved cadence, and making it long enough not to nag.

Layering

Also called vertical remixing. One loop is recorded as several stems — pad, bass, drums, melody — and the game fades them in and out. Add percussion as enemies appear, drop to strings alone when the player hides. The tempo and harmony never change, so it can never go wrong.

Resequencing

Horizontal remixing. Instead of one loop you write several blocks and rules for which may follow which — with short *transition* passages to cover the joins. This gives real musical change, at the cost of writing every plausible route.

Stingers and one-shots

PUNCTUATION

Short fragments fired over whatever is already playing — a hit when the player is spotted, a flourish on a level cleared. Because they land over unknown material, write them to work above any chord: unison, open fifths, or percussion alone.

Waiting for the bar line

QUANTISED

A change triggered the instant the player acts will chop the music mid-phrase. Instead the system holds the request until the next beat, bar or phrase end. This one decision separates scores that feel musical from scores that feel like a jukebox with a fault.

Middleware

THE RULES

Wwise and FMOD, the two standards, both free to learn, sit between your audio files and the game code. You build the layers, loops and transition rules there; programmers just send values — *threat* = 0.7, *area* = forest.

Budgets are musical

THE HIDDEN ONE

Memory, file size and voice counts are finite, especially on handhelds and mobile. Fewer, cleverer layers beat many recorded variations — which is why so much game music is built from small modular cells rather than long through-composed cues.

Compared, and where to start

Two crafts, one set of instincts

Set the two side by side and the difference is not the music but who decides its shape. Then start small: one clip, one loop, one motif — the field rewards finished short things far more than unfinished long ones.

THE TWO CRAFTS COMPARED

	FILM	GAME
<i>Length</i>	Fixed to the frame	Unknown — may be seconds or hours
<i>You deliver</i>	Finished cues	Parts, plus the rules that combine them
<i>Form</i>	Written by you	Assembled by the player
<i>Repetition</i>	Heard once	Heard hundreds of times — plan for it
<i>Cadences</i>	Land where you choose	Mostly avoided; they end things that are not over
<i>Sync</i>	To picture, by timecode	To events, by bar or beat
<i>Tools</i>	Sequencer, score, players	Sequencer plus Wwise or FMOD

Cutscenes are the exception: fixed in length, so scored exactly like film — which is why a game score usually contains both kinds of writing.

WHERE TO START, WITH WHAT YOU HAVE

- 1 Score sixty seconds of something. Take a short clip with the sound off — an old film, a trailer, your own phone footage — and write to it. Nobody will ask what you scored, only whether it worked.
- 2 Write one loop and one layer. Eight bars that join back to themselves, then a version with drums added — that is the whole layering technique.
- 3 Learn one motif properly. Write four notes for a character, then write them six ways: fast, slow, minor, one instrument, a fragment, a fanfare.
- 4 Download FMOD or Wwise. Both have free learning versions and their own tutorials. An afternoon in one teaches more about game audio than a term of reading.
- 5 Find a game jam. Student teams routinely have no composer. It is the most reliable way into the field, and the credit is real.
- 6 Keep studying the orchestra. Both fields run on orchestral instincts — the orchestration, ranges and score-reading packs are groundwork, not a detour.