

# Making Those Games Sound Right

At George Lucas' Skywalker Ranch, sound creators -- known as Foley artists -- spend their days stomping on floors, clanking metal and listening. The goal: Make those video games sound better. By Brad King.



**MARIN COUNTY, CALIFORNIA** -- Jeff Kliment leans against the wall of the tiny control room of the audio effects lab, listening to the sound of gravel crunching under the feet of Montross, the villain in LucasArts' upcoming video game, Bounty Hunter.

"Uh, tell him we can hear his pants," Kliment says to Larry Oppenheimer, the man recording the footsteps.

The pants in question belong to Erik Foreman, who is working in an enclosed sound stage area about 30 feet below the control room at George Lucas' Skywalker Ranch.

Trying to create the sound of a walking 8-foot computer-generated alien, Foreman had pulled up his shorts and had been prancing on a sand-covered concrete slab in what looked like a slow-motion chicken dance. While the gravel-crunching sounded about right, something would have to be done about the faint scraping sound emanating from the friction of the pants.

Oppenheimer breaks the bad news to Foreman, and the sound engineers suggest that maybe Foreman should do the chicken dance again, only this time without wearing pants. They're only half-joking, because improvisation is all part of the job.

This is the life of "Foley artists," who take their name from one of Hollywood's first sound engineers, Jack Foley. They create the sounds that bring movies -- and now video games -- to life.

The team has tens of thousands of pre-recorded clips archived from films, television shows and video games, but each new game requires its own subtle touches. Bounty Hunter, the third-person shooter that puts players in the armored boots of Jango Fett, is no different. After all, nobody has heard Montross walk until now.

Bounty Hunter is due out in the fall for the Sony Playstation2 and Nintendo GameCube.

Today's aborted attempt is one of the rare times the team actually uses the object -- in this case Foreman's feet -- to make game sounds. In the past, Foreman has fastened "metal things" on his clothes to replicate body armor clinking and LucasArts sound designer David Collins glued leather pads on shoes to create the soft step of Jedi.

"The creativity comes in thinking about how you take the sound of banging a wire and turn that into the sound of a lightsaber," Kliment said.

Along with an active ear, creative sound design requires multiple visits to the local hardware store looking for just the right equipment. A standard door lock becomes a cocked trigger. Unspooled audiotape becomes foliage. Despite being overshadowed by the much-anticipated online game Galaxies, also due out this year, Bounty Hunter's hardware budget got a boost when the video-game division teamed with Skywalker Sound.

Traditionally, the LucasArts sound team worked on video games, while the Skywalker Sound team worked on television and movies. Even Industrial Light & Magic, another Lucas company, has gotten into the act, creating cinematics for the game.

The two sound divisions, which worked together in the mid-'80s when they were both located at The Ranch, will spend roughly eight months assembling the 20,000 sound files that will make up every sound in the game, from footsteps to laser blasts, as well as an original score that melds with the rest of the *Star Wars* universe.

It's a daunting task, but the LucasArts group has been innovating video sound since 1985, when the company (then called Lucasfilm Games) released the Commodore 128 game *Ballblazer*, which featured sound clips recorded by musicians that were played depending on what players did in the game, a process now called "rendering."

The collaboration allows Kliment and Oppenheim to tap into the resources at The Ranch. LucasArts' Foley stage, while fine for its purposes, is a closet compared to Skywalker Sound, with about 30 square feet of room, divided into two sections with a partition, five floor surfaces and three square plastic containers with bunched-up audiotape.

Skywalker Sound is a junkman's dream. There is 80 feet of floor space with eleven slabs of floor surfaces, from tile to concrete. The 40-foot-high walls have been dug out of the ground. Sounds stick to the walls here, dying, to limit the hiss Foreman produced earlier with his pants. Dozens of multi-sized suitcases line the back. Rickety aluminum shelves run the length of the wall, stacked several feet high with printer-paper boxes, all filled with the kind of knickknacks that clutter garage sales.

"The primary reason that we do Foley," Oppenheim said hours earlier, before Foreman's pants became an issue, "is to make things sound believable. To do that, we aren't always using whatever makes the sound, and that's when you have to go home and start getting imaginative."

The only thing of much value -- or which at one time could have brought some real cash -- is nearly destroyed. At the front of the room is a black Mini, nearly unrecognizable with a dented hood and racked up doors, half buried under boxes. Thomas Dolby Robertson, a musician who started the Internet company Beatnik left his car after the filming for *Howard The Duck* finished. Robertson's abandoned automobile has been used to make every car noise at Skywalker Sound since 1985.

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