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Game Theory: A-list Game composer Andy Brick talks with Molly Sheridan

At Brick's home studio in Philipse Manor, New York
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Edited and Transcribed by Molly Sheridan
Videotaped by Randy Nordschow

Last night I tried my hand at playing a video game for the first time in more than six years. Standing so far outside mainstream culture, I hadn't fully appreciated the artistry that goes into creating the world these games inhabit—and by extension the long list of required writers, artists, and musicians who make the interactive production come alive.

But I couldn't help but want to take a closer look after talking to Andy Brick, a composers whose name regularly surfaces as one of the premiere American artists working in this field.

A combination of factors let me to his studio door for a *NewMusicBox* chat. I had been reading that the gaming world was increasing in sophistication both artistically and financially, and that the music production was getting a piece of that pie large enough to hire composers and whole symphony orchestras. Gamers seemed unlikely to have conservative music tastes. Was this an untapped audience for the cutting-edge music currently created well under the radar of a mass audience? A compositional goldmine or a straightjacket? And could you actually make a living doing it? Of course, it turned out it was a little of all of that, but not quite in the ways I assumed...

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Lured By Opportunity

Molly Sheridan: I know that you were part of ASCAP 's film scoring workshop in 1998. Would you say that's when you were pushed in this commercial direction? What got you going career-wise on this side of music?

Andy Brick: Well, when I graduated from music school I was convinced that I was going to write chamber music for the rest of my life. That was my love in college, but when I started to investigate ways of making a living as a composer, uh, that was not one of the ways. I didn't really want to go the route of being a teacher part time, and then going for commissions for some of the time, and then maybe having an odd job here or there; I wanted to integrate my career fully into my life. So it seemed to me that film composing was actually the way to go. Right after I graduated from music school I went to a seminar, and there was a panel of established film composers and some music directors, and I had asked the question, "How does one get into the business?" One of the panel members said to me, "Go to your local film school and start writing

music for student films." So I did, and for about three years there I was doing about four or five films a year at NYU. I have a whole arsenal of student films that I did. A couple of them went to Sundance and I got a lot of exposure, but most important I got a demo reel of music that I had for a commercial medium. And when we speak about commercial medium, I've actually only done two or three television commercials in my life. Commercial medium pretty much means anything that's not legit—that's not for concert or isn't a commission…something that's going to be attached to some other media that usually the public will see or buy. So I had a pretty good reel and I saw this ASCAP workshop, so I applied and was selected! I got to take a trip to Hollywood and they provided a nice, I guess it was a 60-piece professional A-list orchestra in the Fox Newman studios, which is one of the great Hollywood studios, and we actually scored scenes from movies that existed. I came back with some really nice cinematic music with live orchestra which was important for me at the time because everything that I had done at that point was small ensemble stuff and I really needed something big in scope to present to the world if I was going to go out and do this. So the ASCAP workshop was instrumental in leading my career. I wouldn't say it was the reason that I went into film composing; it just sort of helped me to achieve certain goals.

Molly Sheridan: Before we get too far from that break, when you felt that commercial pull as opposed to going the concert hall route. How does that fit together for you now, as an artist and then as a commercial composer? I guess I've been thinking of it as a bit like the divide between a graphic designer and a gallery artist. Is that an accurate analogy?

Andy Brick: I think for me it's come back full circle. My career went very commercial, and I was doing just films and just games for a long time, and then all of the sudden game music became this very hip thing, and orchestral game music right now is very much in vogue. The direction of video game music I think these days is tending to licensed, non-orchestral, pre-existing big name bands, groups we all know and love, and new orchestral underscores by fairly well-established composers in the scene. Orchestral soundtracks in video games have become very popular. For me it's been kind of ironic because I was asked to conduct the first-ever orchestral concert of Western and Japanese video game music, which was last summer in Leipzig, Germany, and because of that I've been able to make this interesting bridge between what we call the legit world of commissions and concerts and performances and the commercial side. So I've been able to do both and that's been really fortunate. It's been a long road and a somewhat methodically planned road, but I was fortunate in that the pieces came together.

Molly Sheridan: Let's talk a little bit about the fact that these are works-for-hire and what you're giving up working in those circumstances.

Andy Brick: Let me give you an example. For composers working in a commercial medium, a website is very important so that if someone is considering your work, before they contact you, they can just go to your website and see what you do, hear your style, and make that initial decision as to whether you are right for their particular job, so it's important that they have audio examples. There comes a time in a commercial composer's career when audio on a website is a very difficult issue because a lot of the work that you do, which is work-for-hire, you can't make public until the game or movie is released and then sometimes even after it is released—since you don't own it any more, there are restrictions on how you can use it even though you wrote it. So of all the music that I've done, I would say about 60 percent of my best stuff I can't put on the website.

Molly Sheridan: Working with these huge media companies must be something of an overwhelming experience at times as well. I'd image this is quite a different way to work as opposed to being off in solitary in your studio.

Andy Brick: Understandably so. These companies are investing huge amounts of money in these games. The amount of money that they're talking about is wild, it's feature film level money, and they have a lot of things that are connected to it including marketing and timing of release. In

the case of a certain product that I'm working on right now, I did this fantastic demo for these guys, and I'd love to put it up on my website, I'd love for people to be able to hear it, but I can't. They make you sign legal documents that pretty much restrict you from saying anything about it, to the point that I can't tell you the name of this title, which is why I'm speaking so vaguely about it. I can't tell you the company that's doing it.

Molly Sheridan: And isn't there the possibility that if a company solicits your demo, they own that work free and clear?

Andy Brick: Well, it depends on the company, and every company's restrictions are different. But yes, that has happened where when you do a demo, if the company agrees that you're going to do it, then you don't own that demo. Even if you paid to have players and you financed the production, once you sign that non-disclosure agreement, you cannot do anything with that demo.

Molly Sheridan: So, as you've said, we're talking about a lot of money here. I'm curious how that translates into the financing of the music production. What does that buy you in terms of quality of production? I know that for some of these games it bought you the services of an entire orchestra—not something every composer who writes a work for orchestra gets to have access to.

Andy Brick: Right. I get a lot of big orchestras—I had 140 people recently. These are huge orchestras, but they're being financed by huge companies. Right now, there is…I don't know if I would say significant, but there's money, there are budgets for live orchestras in both films and games. I sort of made my inroads because I was a guy who was able to do everything from beginning to end. I was able to do the composition and I was able to orchestrate my own material, which if you're in the commercial world is a big issue because not every composer knows how to realize his music for full orchestra, but I was able to do that. I was able to do the MIDI demos, which five years ago in the game world, and even in the film world, was very important because a lot of the people who were making the decisions don't yet have that connection between what the [piano reduction] and the full orchestra sounds like, so you have to give them a mock-up via synthesizers. I was able to do that. And finally, I was able to do all the scoring and notation and the final copying on computer and make my own parts. So A to Z, I was able to take it from the very inception to actually putting the parts in front of the orchestra by myself. And that gave me an inroad and I think that those skills now are required. At a certain point in time, you get other people to help you because time becomes a big issue, but that was a way that I was able to present myself to these companies financing these big orchestras and make myself attractive to them. And then the bottom line is you have to be writing music which is…viable. And what that means varies from project to project, and in games, viable is a pretty big range. There's some pretty wild stuff out there in the game world.

Spelling Out Selling Out

Molly Sheridan: I just heard a statistic that 100 percent of this year's graduating college students have played a video game, but I think we might have this perception, especially among people who don't play video games or haven't in along time, that the scores are very ping-pong, well, like Pong, and it's pretty stunning when you hear these full orchestral scores coming out of someone's state of the art home stereo speakers.

Andy Brick: And there are some amazing soundtracks out there. One of the really interesting things also about game music is that it acts very differently than any other music. A lot of film composers, and I being one when I started, thought, "OK, well, I can score for film which is an image, so I will be able to score for a game, which is an image," but it's a very different thing. Film composing is linear—you start at the beginning of the movie and you go to the end, but a game is not linear in nature. You start at the beginning and then when you're in the middle, you can either go backwards or forwards, or if you're towards the end you might jump back to somewhere in the middle, or the outcome of some action that you take might lead you in a different direction with different scenery, but from that same exact point if you pick a different action, it lead you top a completely different environment. So you get this situation where you don't necessarily know as a composer what's going to happen in the game play, and you have to plan accordingly.

Molly Sheridan: Is that artistically inspiring or hindering?

Andy Brick: Oh, it's inspiring. I think it's just a challenge. It's another way of thinking about the way that music evolves. It's not a new way of thinking—I mean, classical composers would do something like this [demonstrates] as a way of drawing out something that would otherwise be very short [demonstrates]. What they do is they basically create this little cadence or, in this case, a false cadence, which allows you to keep moving on. And in the type of situation where you're faced with a point in time as a composer where you must be able to go to a number of different environments in the music, you essentially create your own types of cadences—all sorts of ways that you can come to a point that sounds like you're about to arrive at someplace and then go someplace different. It's really important. I studied a lot of Wagner to figure that out, because to me Wagner was just the king of that. If you've ever taken the enormous amount of time to listen to the Ring cycle, there are times when he just goes for literally days without actually coming to a conclusion. He leads you up to this point, and then right when you think you're going to take a left turn, you turn right, and that's critical—that kind of composing.

Molly Sheridan: And depending on what a character does, too, you won't know how long this particular music will be going on.

Andy Brick: And that's a good point actually. In a lot of game music there are different types of requirement for writing, especially when you're working with a series of loops where the music has to be able to endlessly repeat. If you think about a situation where a character comes to a decision-making point and they're faced with these choices on a menu, and the player says, "Okay, I have to make this choice, but I'm going to go get a soda first and throw some French fries in the oven," and so for ten minutes, there's this screen and things have stopped, yet there's got to be some kind of dynamic element to even that that keeps the game in motion, and when the screen is stopped, the only dynamic element is music. But you don't know if the person is going to be gone for 30 seconds because the kitchen is right next door, or whether he's going to be gone for 10 minutes because he's actually going to go bake a pizza.

Molly Sheridan: But for those ten minutes the whole family may be listening to your music!

So, because of your skill set, you have had the opportunity to work with orchestras and groups of live musicians quite often in addition to using synths. How much of that is your decision?

Andy Brick: The chances of getting a live orchestra vs. using MIDI? Well, it's changing.

Molly Sheridan: And in terms of just what you like to use for this medium as well. I mean, sometimes an electronic sound is what you're looking for…

Andy Brick: It's a good question. It's a deep question, probably a much deeper question than you realize. Boy, where do I begin? Let me start by saying this: The role of MIDI, of synthesizers is changing. It used to be that synthesizers, at least in the game world, somebody who could

really massage the synths, really make them sing, would be able to do a production that was good, good enough, and sound great for a game. That's no longer really acceptable. In the A-list games with orchestral music, it really needs to be live. The audience is too sophisticated and their expectations are too high now. I mean, we're not talking about a 14-year-old who's used to listening to Top 40 radio or pop and rap anymore. The kids who started in the early days of games are my age, they're in their thirties, and they've evolved musically. These blip and bleeps of the synthesizer, no matter how well they were done, the audience can tell. The imperfections of the orchestra in a live recording are precisely what makes it real and what makes it wonderful. With a synthesizer everything is perfectly tuned, always, and it sounds strange. It doesn't sound bad; it's just not real. So I think the audience is demanding that we have real, live orchestras.

Molly Sheridan: I also don't want to discredit the fact that the technology is developing rapidly and your options are huge. But from your perspective, what has the evolution been and how is that playing out today. You might be in a slightly unusual position in that you get to use orchestras, but what are your preferences in different situations.

Andy Brick: For me the evolution of MIDI and live orchestra has not only been from the use of MIDI vs. live orchestra, but how it's being implemented and what can be done. I think with an orchestra, at least for me, there's an element of time that comes into the picture here. You're up against these just ridiculous time restrictions, and if you're a composer who likes to think, and likes to have a very solid mental foundation for what's going on, you've got to watch your time. MIDI takes huge amounts of time to make it sound good enough to put in a final production. Huge amounts. Way more time than it does to get in front of an orchestra and do four or five takes of the cue and move on.

As a matter of fact, a year or two ago I wrote an article for *Game Developer* magazine about the financial cost of MIDI synthesizers vs. a live orchestra, and I actually showed that, in certain situations, it's cheaper to go to a live orchestra than it is to do a full MIDI production. If you think about a 70-piece orchestra, if you're going to do that with a synthesizer, you're going to have 50 or 60 tracks, and you're going to have to play in each part, and then you'll have to sit there and massage the data. You record the line you're going to use and then you play it back and you record this knob doing that to give you just the right amount of diminuendo, and then you want a little bit of a crescendo here so you have to use this knob, and then you're going to have a little bit more vibrato here so you use this knob…and half an hour later you've now recorded ten seconds of your flute line. Well, five days later you've now got a two-minute MIDI production, which is presentable as a final product. It sounds great, but it took you five eight-hour days. Get yourself in front of a 50 piece orchestra and do that same two-minute piece in 45 minutes and you've just spent exactly the same amount of money. You've got either one guy doing 50 hours or 50 guys doing one hour. It doesn't matter, so why not do it live? That's not true in all cases, but it's true in more cases that you'd think.

The one place where I see MIDI really helping is that it does give the decision-making people an idea of what is going to happen when they invest this $150,000 to have your music realized by an orchestra. The other thing is that once you get good at it, it makes the process of preparing the materials for an orchestra extremely fast. Once the piece is written I can take a three-minute cue and generate all the parts and the score for it in about half a day. It has facilitated that process greatly. And also, when you're first learning how to orchestrate, it's amazing because you can try things and hear that this works or this combination doesn't work. It can be a great aid that way.

Education Means Never Saying You're Finished

Molly Sheridan: I know you have degrees from the University of Michigan and Mannes, so you came to this with a solid foundation academically. What were the things that you learned afterward? What sorts of skills do you need to pick up to catch the attention of some of these companies?

Andy Brick: Boy, there are a couple things. For me, the most important education I got was the education I've gotten since finishing school. I've always taken lessons; I've always pursued teachers even after graduating. I studied with this guy Danny Troob for a number of years—he orchestrated all of the Disney hits of the '90s—and I've studied with various other people who have helped me along the way.

What I would suggest for somebody who is looking to go in a similar direction to where I've gone is get your skills to the point where you can do everything by yourself. The way I see it, before anyone's going to give you a budget to allow you to assign functions to other people, they're going to want you to do it by yourself. They're going to say, "Ok, we've got a budget for six live instruments and we need you to make it sound like a live orchestra." So get your computer skills down so you know how to do the audio recording. Make sure you know how to make those samples sing and how to mask samples with one live instrument—that's one of the greatest things that you can do if you're working with samples and synths on a string section. We all know there is just no way that you can recreate a real string section with MIDI. There are some really good sample libraries and you can go and spend $6,000 and get the best string samples out there that have all the tools and software and special programs just to make the strings sound good, but at the end of the day they don't sound real. They sound really good, and in and of themselves they sound kind of cool but they're not real. So one of the really good tricks is you take a single violinist and you have him play whatever those synthesizers are playing and then you mix it in way down so that you can't hear it as a solo violin, you just hear it as a real element in this synth bed, and it changes things dramatically. So get your skills down. Know the tricks; know the computer tools really well. That's one piece of advice I would give.

Study orchestration—read scores. If you're going to be working with an orchestra, you've got to know how harps pedal, all these fine little things and it's much more than they may teach you in music school. I have a closet full of scores and I've torn them apart and made notes in the margins. So study, keep going. You're not done when you're done with music school. It's never ending and there is a ton of music out there. Seek out music that you're not exposed to. I just did a demo for a game and we needed to have an accordion in it. Accordion? They didn't teach me anything about the accordion at Mannes or the University of Michigan, so I went out and I found some accordion music and I talked to the guy who was going to be playing the accordion and took a lesson just so I could feel the instrument. It's a never-ending process. There's a ton that you can and should and have to do.

Molly Sheridan: I heard Steve Schnur from Electronic Arts speak recently and he was throwing around some really fantastic, unbelievable financials, and the audience was floored how big the number had gotten while we were, I don't know, looking at something else. For composers coming up, are there opportunities here? Markets like these are always tight, but is it opening up in any way. How would you gauge the opportunities?

Andy Brick: I think the field is closing. When I first got into it, which was about eight years ago, it was a completely open field. Nobody thought about game music. MIDI was sort of evolving. You could do MIDI orchestral scores and get some kind of reasonable sense of what the orchestra would sound like if it ever were to be done with live orchestra which at that point it wouldn't because the budgets weren't there. And then as it evolved and as the media started to pay attention to game music and the composers were given the budgets to do live realizations of the

music, it became very popular and it's become an extremely popular venue for people to try and break into. The doors are about as open as they are in the film world right now, so the chance of getting yourself into a situation where you're going to use a live orchestra in a game is about the same as your chances of getting into a film that's going to give you a live orchestra.

Molly Sheridan: Do you run into situations where you hit an irreconcilable impasse in these projects and have to say fine, it's a commercial project, I need to just let it go, that's just how it is…

Andy Brick: Oh, you *must* be able to let it go. I was in a big recording session with a huge orchestra, and the audio director was there at the recording session and we were running down a cue of mine and it was sounding great, and the ending was sort of a recapitulation of what had happened at the beginning, and he turned and said, "You know, I think it would be really cool if all the instruments got softer from here until the end, so there's this big diminuendo in the last 20 seconds." And I was sitting there and thinking, "Well, that makes absolutely no sense at all," and I hadn't written for these instruments in a way that would allow them to do that well. But he said, "Let's just tell everybody to do a diminuendo." And I turned to him and said, "I'm not sure that that's going to work," and he goes, "Oh, it'll work." I was thinking I'm not sure it's going to work in terms of the music and he was thinking in terms of the game and the images. Well, yes it will work in terms of the game if it could be done. Well, we had to modify a little bit, and sure enough in the recording now there's this diminuendo for 20 seconds and every time I hear it, I think, "Why did they do a diminuendo there?" but then sometimes I think, "You know what, that was actually a really good call because it does fit what's happening at that moment really well."

So you've got to let go. You've got to remember that you're writing for someone else and what they choose to do with it after you've written it is their choice, and if they ask you to do something that isn't your first instinct, you've got to reconsider your instincts and try to understand where they're coming from. And sometimes you'll have a good dialogue. You'll have an audio director or producer and they'll ask you to try this and you'll say, "No, that's not going to work, but we can try this," and you'll go back and forth. And sometimes, they just say, "You know what? Add a high hat there. That would sound *really* cool with your French horns." And you're like, "A *high hat* ?…well, okay." You've got to let go.

Another example of what happens in commercial composing—you're asked to write in the "style of" and as a composer you're then faced with a kind of conflict: How do I emulate what they're asking me to do, because they are the bosses and they are giving direction, and at the same time infuse your own element into it?

Working Artist Is Not An Oxymoron

Molly Sheridan: I know that you conducted the concert in Europe of game music and I know that releasing CD soundtracks of this music is also a big industry. People that play the games want to listen to the music in their car. What's your experience of how this music stands on its own since it is so much an integrated part of a multi-media package.

Andy Brick: I think that compared to other forms of commercial media it's great if not better than anything offered. It's a very interesting scenario because, unlike a film, you have a person who is physically engaged in a media that contains this music. When you're watching a film and sitting in

the audience you're passive. When you're sitting in front of a game, you're like this [sits up straight with hands holding imaginary controller] or even like this [leans far forward] and a lot of times you're like this [shakes imaginary controller violently] because somehow there's this perception that the harder you push that button the better your success. But there's a physical interaction that's going on. And just as a musician has physical memory of a piece of music, people's physical memories of playing the game are going to be connected to the music and the game play and the images that the artists have drawn. So there's this very deep connection between the music and the game and the person who's experiencing it. So I think there's a deeper connection, deeper than any other media I've seen, between the audience and the music, and I think that's why a lot of these soundtracks are gaining popularity.

Molly Sheridan: But say I'm sitting in that concert hall, but I've never played these games, am I going to enjoy the experience?

Andy Brick: I hope so. I think you would. The concert that we had last year, which was the first of its kind, was sold out. We sold out the Gewandhaus which is a very historic concert hall in Europe and they gave us a ten-minute standing ovation, and I know for a fact everyone wasn't familiar with all of the music because there was music being premiered. Again it comes back to whether or not you happen to connect with the music. In the case of the people at the concert who were gamers, they connected on a physical as well as emotional level. I think for people who don't have a game experience, it's open to the world of whatever you consider to be good music and whether or not it appeals to you. I think it comes from a very emotional base because you're evoking a human response in the music and so I think to that extent it's very enjoyable.

With a lot of commercial media the composers who are writing for games today are faced with this line—where are things are no longer accessible to the listener and when they stop being accessible, is that acceptable? In most cases, it's not. But accessibility is a pretty broadly defined word in the game business. We can do some pretty far out stuff. I think that anyone, if they were into orchestral music, would enjoy one of these concerts. It's a pretty wild experience. There was this energy in the concert hall that was unlike anything I've ever felt. I had this sense of all these 17 to 35-year-olds' enthusiasm just building throughout the evening, and when we hit the really big titles, like Final Fantasy, you could just feel this energy. The orchestra that we used, the Czech National Symphony, is a Beethoven, Brahms, Dvorak kind of orchestra. During the concerts I was conducting and I was watching them. They were kind of shocked, and they fed upon the reaction that we were getting because most of them didn’t have any firsthand experience with this music. We kind of all went into this thinking, "Well, I wonder what is going to happen?" I was particularly a little bit nervous, "How is a guy or a girl who is used to sitting in front of a PlayStation going to react passively to this kind of music?" and it worked great. People really liked it.

Molly Sheridan: I haven't wanted to drag you through your whole resume—you've done commercials, you've done Disney, and films and games. But looking back on those projects, which stand out to you as particularly artistically or even just financially satisfying? If I met you at some cocktail party, what anecdote might you be likely to tell me?

Andy Brick: Oh, God, I did this one film…this is a good story and this is really important for composers who want to be commercial. I won't go into names and details but a number of years ago back I did a documentary film and I would write something and the direction I was getting was, "Simplify. Just make it simple." This went back and forth for the first couple of scenes because everything I did, they would just say, "Simplify." So at one point, just as kind of a joke, I did this little guitar line that was basically this [plays two notes back and forth slowly] for about a minute. Nothing but that. And sent it to the producer thinking, "Ok, at least we can find out what the boundaries are and then go from there." And he got it and said, "That's perfect." So for the remainder of this film I had to figure out a way to keep myself engaged in the music when really the whole thing was just based off of these two notes. It's hard as a composer when you feel like you have all these great ideas to just do this [plays two notes again].

It's really important that, as a composer, you develop compositional abilities not only the way that your natural tendency is and not only try to achieve what you think is the best thing that you could possibly write, but try to achieve that same level of quality in things that you think might not be the best thing that you could write. Explore areas that you would never go to because they're not your voice because at some point in time somebody's going to ask you to do that. And I found my little thing in that score that inspired me and still get something interesting out of that. It's happened to me over and over again where I look at a project, I get direction, and I say, "Well, that's not how I compose, that's just not the way I do it." And then you have to adjust your thinking and say, "Well, yeah, I can make it the way that I do it, I just have to approach it from a different perspective," and that's really important."

Molly Sheridan: Do you write "concert hall" music or music not driven to a specific project very often?

Andy Brick: No. I wish I did. I don't. I'm booked right now writing music for projects all the way through December. I've got people waiting for me to finish one project so I can start on the next. I'm hoping that in 10 or 15 years from now I'll be able to do nothing but write concert works but right now at this point in my life and in my career, I'm doing the commercial thing. And it's fine. I've been so lucky because what I'm writing for commercial media is not far from what I'd be writing for a concert. It's really close; it's full orchestra stuff. I've been given some nice liberties so far with the companies that I've worked with where they've basically said, "Do whatever it is that you do," and then they kind of reign you in or you get kind of crazy and they say, "Slow down," but no, I don't do a whole lot of concert works now. I wish I could. I've had a lot of my stuff performed in concert, but it's all stuff that I've done for games.

Molly Sheridan: Any regrets that you're not a theory professor somewhere and writing music in your after-class hours?

Andy Brick: A little bit. I wouldn't call them regrets. I would have loved to be a music theory teacher. Music theory—I just love it. I guess I always wanted to write and I wanted to see if I could make a living writing and I think that was more important to me than being a music theory teacher. Certainly there are plenty of music theory teachers out there who write, and in a lot of the cases in academia from what I've seen it can be a fairly even split. I didn't necessarily even want it to be a split so I don't have regrets as far as career choices, I have regrets insofar as something that has really interested me in my life—music theory—I haven't been able to spend as much time as maybe I would have liked to pursuing it. But if I were dedicated to just that then I would be in a different place. But here I am now, and I'm happy with that.