



THINKSPACE

E D U C A T I O N

Career Guide

My name is Guy Michelmore and for most of my working life I have been a film, games and TV composer. I work for people like **Marvel**, **Disney** and **DreamWorks** and have been lucky enough to pick up an **EMMY** nomination along the way.

I am extremely fortunate and love my job.



I originally started ThinkSpace Education over 20 years ago because so many people asked me how they could do what I do for a living. This career guide is designed to give you an insight and a reality check for those hoping to enter this industry. I'll also talk about some of the many alternative careers available in film, games and TV music and audio that you might already be well qualified for, so stay tuned.

What does a career look like?

This used to be an easy question: you're a full-time composer. Now it's more complicated as the vast majority of working composers do more than one job, and that's not a bad thing. If you achieve the "dream" of becoming a full-time composer, it means you have much less choice of the kind of work you can do because you are relying on it 100% to pay the bills. If scoring arcade gambling games for mobile phones brings in

the money, that's what you have to keep doing. So full-time can often mean giving up on your dream of scoring delicate and emotional art movies because they simply won't pay you enough to live.

How Long Does It Take?

Most composers take at least 5 years to establish a regular flow of work and maybe 10 before you can live comfortably on that income. For some people it's quicker than that, but don't expect it to happen overnight.

So can I really earn a living writing film or games music?

Maybe. There is a lot of work about right now for great composers who are willing and able to write music the market wants to buy. While there is a lot of work, there is also a lot of competition and the bar for quality is now higher than ever. So you need to be extremely good at what you do and, almost more important, really well tuned in to what the market is buying.

The Quality Threshold

Lots of work with lots of people chasing it means the standard is set very high. This means a lot of composers fall into the grey area of good but not-good-enough to win work. Almost everything is a competitive pitch, and it is easy to consistently lose out in one pitch after another without ever actually getting the gig.

This is why the most important thing is to focus on your music and never stop striving to make it better. This is more important than networking, who you know or any of the rest of it: write great music and perfect your craft.

The Biggest Obstacle

This is one of the most common roadblocks we bump into. You can't simply turn out 1980s orchestral film scores and hope to find a market in 2019. Life has moved on and so should you. But part of the trick here is identifying within yourself the core transferable skills and working out how to refocus your music so that it better matches what people are looking for.



Genre Specific

The majority of composers will focus on one specific genre: TV drama, action-adventure games, animation, trailers, horror films etc - and then most of their work will then come from that genre.

Swapping genres can be really hard

as most clients hire you on the strength of the work you've done before which means A) it's hard to get your first gig and B) it can be almost harder to swap to a completely different genre once you are already established.

So before you start marketing yourself, you need to do some research and work out where there is a viable market for your music.

Here's a quick overview.

Film

This is a tough area to earn a living. The market is pretty flat and music budgets are extremely challenging. There is a very large work-for-free buffer as well (this is the amount of work you have to do for nothing before you start getting paid). Also, the royalties for film composers are more limited than, for example, TV.

Less than 5% of independent movies make a profit. Just think about that statistic for moment before embarking on a career in this sector.

Overall it is a wonderfully satisfying area to work in but hellishly difficult to make a living. The majority of composers I know in this area earn a living doing other things like trailers and commercials and do the movies for fun. A very small number of people, often living in

LA, do earn a very good living from films but being one of them is more of a dream than a business plan. It doesn't mean it won't happen, it's just very unlikely.

Television

There has never been a better time to work in TV. Netflix is commissioning \$6 BILLION of original production this year. The rapid growth of streaming services like Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hulu etc. is powering what one lawyer described to me as a 'new golden age of TV'.

You will almost always be paid for TV work as they need to acquire rights. That means the work-for-free buffer is very low. Royalties are still a very significant source of income for most TV composers although for streamed services the royalty income is low to non-existent.

A lot of people have observed how the distinction between film and TV is not really that useful any more, as Netflix productions have larger budgets than many movies. The distinction is more between long-form narrative fiction and episodic drama.

TV is very niche driven, and every niche has its own expectations, micro-economy and dynamic so you need to look at individual parts of the industry and focus your attention on that.

Video Games

The video games industry is now bigger than the film and music industries combined! It's huge. It pays reasonably well even at a low indie level, but there is a work-for-free buffer. Most developers are looking for 3 shipped titles before you get paid. It also relies on a high level of knowledge of how interactive, non-linear music works both creatively and technically. That's a good thing because if you learn that, then you cut away a lot of the competition. You may need to learn middleware like FMOD or WWISE to get a foothold.

Many composers are also games sound designers and that is a vibrant and hugely satisfying career path in its own right.

Production or Library Music

This is also an area that is thriving. The huge increase in the quantity of media means all of it needs music. A lot of the time they don't have the time or money to commission music so library is the best option. This can pay extremely well but there are a lot of new emerging libraries with no real traction who will commission library albums that will never earn any money. If you're going to do library, try to get in with a large established company where the income may be substantial. You may need to do some work for small new libraries to get some recognition, but you won't earn a lot of money from your first efforts.

Expect it to take a while, probably years, before you start to see an income stream.

Trailers and Commercials

Very competitive and oversaturated, it's dominated by some well-known individual composers and well-established production companies who farm out pitches to a team of remote composers. The upside is it can be very well paid. The downside is you might have to do dozens of pitches and revisions for nothing or very little and even then not get the gig.

Alternative Paths

There are plenty of other ways of using your passion for music and your technical and creative skills to work in the creative industries. Many of them offer a much more regular pay packet and an easier entry route. Here are just a few:

Music Editor - With the growth of library music has come new opportunities for music editors. Working for production companies or composers, choosing and putting music to picture, this is a skilled job that's paid by the day.

Video Games Sound Designer - This is an area full of opportunity. There are normally 3 or 4 times as many sound designers on a game as composers, and they are usually contracted for the duration of the game so there is a lot more security as well. The skill set is very

similar to that of the games composer; telling stories with sound instead of music.

Audio Post Production - Creating audio environments and sound design for film and television is again a hugely creative and technical job, and the kind of thing most composers excel at. Proper full time jobs, reasonable pay and a fun and creative environment make this a very popular alternative.

Music Supervisor - Clearing tracks for film and TV, coordinating with the composer and the production company, this is a highly specialised career path and one that requires additional training or working as an assistant to an established music supervisor.

Music Business - Music publishing, performing rights organisations and the major/independent music companies are full of creative opportunities. It requires a good knowledge of the business side of things but there are lots of opportunities for normal salaried employment.

Orchestrator - Many composers prefer to stand back from the line of fire and enjoy working with a live orchestra. It is a specific skill and career path. Obviously work is completely freelance and it is in proportion to the number of live scores being recorded. Most orchestrators start out working for a more established person but some just start orchestrating friends work and then spread out from there.

Assistant Composer - If you are under 35, no ties or expectations of a large income, and live in Los Angeles, New York or London then this is potentially a viable way in. Assistants will often spend years making tea and archiving files before getting anywhere near something more creative. Don't become an assistant assuming you are going to be writing music. You won't. Not in the short term at least. It takes a very specific personality to succeed as an assistant and when you do write you will be imitating your employer's style. The up-side is assistants who can stay the course sometimes emerge much, much higher up the food chain (Lorne Balfe being a good example).

So how can I make this happen?

Work hard and make the music as good as it can be, as well as market focussed. Then make friends. It is in-part about who you know, but most people start out knowing nobody, so you better get out there. Go to film and games festivals and the big TV markets. Hang out in Facebook groups. Humility, generosity of spirit, and being a nice person to know are the keys to successful networking, not pushing your enormous talent at every possible opportunity. Being relentlessly well organised and staying in touch is pretty crucial too. If you get a project, make friends with everyone and never let those contacts go cold.



ThinkSpace orchestral recording session in LA

How do I know if my music is up to scratch?

You don't. Your friends and family won't know either and just because your best music is less bad than the worst music on TV doesn't mean anyone will buy it. You need professional help.

How can ThinkSpace help?

We run online master's degrees where our students get the intensive training, honest feedback and technical skills they need to succeed. All our faculty are hard-working professional composers, sound designers and orchestrators, often award-winning and working on AAA projects. These people are plugged into the market and know what you need to do to get your music market ready.

We are very different to other higher education institutions. For example, **98.3% of our students graduate**. That's the same as **Oxford and Cambridge** and better than *any other online school*. We care about every single student; building communities and providing help and support long after they graduate. All that is probably why **80% of our graduates find work in their chosen field**.

To find out more click the link below or get in touch with our course manager:

tim@thinkspaceeducation.com

Find out how ThinkSpace can make that career a reality.

