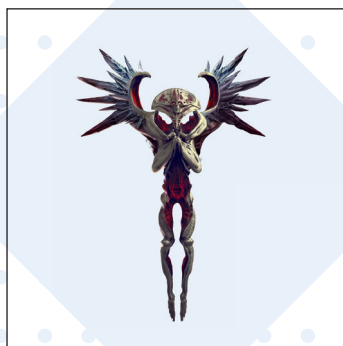


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**M E T A L :**  
**H E L L S I N G E R**

From a cancelled project to locked-down singers:  
how the heavy-metal shooter was forged

By **KHEE HOON CHAN**

**Format** PC, PS4, PS5, Xbox One, Xbox Series

**Developer** The Outsiders

**Publisher** Funcom

**Origin** Sweden

**Release** 2022

Picture it: an FPS in which you don't just slay creatures from the bowels of hell, but do so in time to the pit's music genre of choice: heavy metal. *Metal: Hellsinger's* concept is an unholy union – and one that was born out of an appropriately demonic experience. Creative director **David Goldfarb** remembers playing *Id's* 2016 *Doom* reboot while listening to Swedish metal band Meshuggah: "I was shooting on the beat, just because it was fun. And then I thought, oh, it would be cool to do this with a shooter, rather than a typical rhythm game."

At the time, though, he didn't give the idea much consideration. The Outsiders, the Stockholm-based studio led by Goldfarb, was busy working on *Darkborn*, an action-adventure game that cast the player as a monster being hunted by Vikings. All that changed, though, after development on *Darkborn* ceased in 2019. Seeking a publisher to help revive the project, Goldfarb approached Funcom CEO Rui Casais. It didn't work out, but another idea mentioned during that meeting caught Casais' attention: "A metal album come to life".

It comes as no surprise, then, to learn that the people responsible for *Metal: Hellsinger's* soundtrack – Swedish duo **Elvira Björkman** and **Nicklas Hjertberg**, aka Two Feathers – were involved right from the beginning of the project. The pair were already working with The Outsiders on *Darkborn's* sound design; when they caught wind of this new prototype, they were keen to get involved. The initial assumption was that Two Feathers would play a similar role as on *Darkborn*. But once they discovered that the game was going to have a metal soundtrack, Hjertberg says, "we kind of re-pitched ourselves to [The Outsiders], because we hadn't really shown our metal writing to them before."

The duo are hardly newcomers to the genre: in 2019, they'd released their own symphonic metal album, under the moniker Two Feathers: Epoch. And they'd worked on plenty of videogame soundtracks, from *Warhammer: Vermintide to Angry Birds*. But they'd never before crossed the streams, nor worked on a game that tied its music so closely to its mechanics – and this meant working within some new constraints.

In *Metal: Hellsinger*, all the player's actions – shooting, reloading, jumping and dodging – are tied to the beat. And accordingly, all of Two Feathers' songs were written in tandem with the game's development, informed by their place in the narrative, and how their shape would fit with



**Metal: Hellsinger's success is in no small part down to the involvement of its composers in its design from the start**

the level design. "The instrumental part of the music was very much tested in the levels before we went further," Björkman says. "The developers had time to try it out first and see how it worked, and give feedback if needed."

Working in this way brought new challenges. "If we were to make, let's say, a super-fast song or a very slow song, that would actually affect how

"IF THIS IS A SONG THAT YOU'VE NEVER HEARD BEFORE, YOU SHOULD STILL BE ABLE TO HEADBANG TO IT"

the game is being played," Hjertberg says. "That is something that I don't think we have ever had to focus on too much when writing music [for other games]." All songs had to be between 100 and 140 beats per minute in order to be used in the audio engine, FMOD Studio, upon which *Metal: Hellsinger* is built. They also had to be written in the 4/4 time signature. It's the basis of most conventional songs, meaning players would be able to count the beat instinctively – but metal is rarely about sticking to the conventions. "We needed to be extra clear with things [in *Metal: Hellsinger*], but in metal, we like to not always be extra clear on where that one, two, three, four beat is," Björkman explains. Hjertberg adds: "We always made sure that, if this is a song that you've never heard before, you should still be able to headbang to it – or headbob."

These constraints made it difficult to employ other hallmarks of the genre, such as blast beats,

a rapid and often chaotic drum pattern, which risks overwhelming the player. "You can't have constant blast beating because players want to be able to find the beat easily," Hjertberg says. "[Otherwise] they can't really play as well as we want them to." Other tricks in the songwriter's arsenal also had to be curbed, such as adding pauses and space at specific parts of the song, which could lead to the game's visuals losing sync with the soundtrack.

"You can't really have a long, winding fade-in," Hjertberg adds. "We had to think a lot about whether this is on beat enough."

**While Two Feathers** learned how to apply their musical skills in this new way, they weren't the only ones who found themselves in unexplored territory on this project. Part of *Metal: Hellsinger's* appeal lies in the fact that there aren't many other rhythm shooters out there, and certainly none that dive into one musical genre to this depth. But this meant the studio had few examples to draw reference from. The solution, Goldfarb says, was to think of it as "a shooter first and a rhythm game second, because we have a lot of shooter developers in the studio, including myself." (Goldfarb's own CV includes *Payday 2* and EA's *Battlefield: Bad Company* games.)

In doing so, he admits, the team "simplified a lot of the rhythm elements". This meant scrapping a slew of ideas that the team didn't have the time or resources to implement. Beyond the aforementioned time signatures and tempo changes, perhaps the biggest rejected idea was that of playing along to the track's melody, rather than just following its underlying beat.

"It's one of those ideas that feels very natural, of course. That 'Oh, it would be really cool to shoot your pistols to something other than a one-two-three-four metronome'," Björkman says. "But, especially if you have never heard the music before, you have no idea what's coming up." The only solution would be to make songs more repetitive, so that players could learn them by rote – which feels rather against the spirit of the game. "I think if we have a good chance to develop more, that would be fun to look into further and see if we can land on something."

The Outsiders hit upon *Metal: Hellsinger's* best idea partway through production. Each stage starts out with just a barebones backing track, but as you fill a multiplier with consistent, on-beat attacks and actions, extra parts layer in ▶

## THE MAKING OF...

– crunchy basslines, aggressive guitar riffs and, eventually, sung lyrics. This approach was the result of several rounds of playtesting, and the realisation that it helped to ease players into the rhythmic elements of each level. As this mechanic began to be incorporated and iterated upon, Björkman says, there was a realisation: “It would be so cool to have that last layer be vocals.”

That led to discussions about having guest vocalists sing on these tracks. It so happened that Hjelberg’s mother knew Mikael Stanne, singer in the Swedish death metal band Dark Tranquillity. They got in touch, and he agreed to put his vocals to an early prototype. “We told him, very honestly, that we don’t know if this is going to become something else,” Björkman says – this version was being created to pitch the project to Funcom. “But he was game to do it either way.”

With Stanne’s involvement, getting other metal vocalists on board became much easier. The final game boasts a murderers’ row of modern metal talent, including Serj Tankian (System Of A Down), Randy Blythe (Lamb Of God), Alissa White-Gluz (Arch Enemy) and **Matt Heafy** (Trivium). “I sometimes joke that I pitched this project more than the game designer, in a way,” Björkman laughs. Not that Heafy, a long-time videogame fan, needed much convincing. “When they approached us, I said ‘Absolutely, of course!’” he says. “They showed me clips of the game. I said: ‘This is amazing – this is the exact kind of music I’ve been saying needs to be in videogames my whole life.’”

While the stars themselves might have been enthusiastic, navigating the terms of their record deals proved something of a minefield. “Working with record labels, just like the process of signing artists, was always hard,” Goldfarb says. “It was up and down, and it would take time, and we had to be quite patient about getting people on board. We had a couple of people that it took almost a year to sign.” The whole process was made at least a little easier, though, by the situation in which the game was being developed. “In a weird way, the pandemic is probably why we were able to get everybody. Because they couldn’t tour, everybody was at home, like: ‘What are we going to do?’ And then we called them and asked, ‘Maybe you want to record a song for us?’”

Meanwhile, demos for each song were being written and recorded at The Outsiders’ studio. “We would do some brainstorming around things that could be lyrics,” Goldfarb says. “And then [Two Feathers] would do the arranging.” The pair set

## Q&A

**David Goldfarb**  
Creative director



**What do you think of comparisons between *Metal: Hellsinger* and *BPM: Bullets Per Minute*?**

We were well into development before we knew about that game existing. I mean, it’s cool – they did a really good job – but they were not an influence, even though there are a lot of people who think that the games are similar. And in some ways, on the surface, they are: both are rhythm games that take place in hell. But mechanically we’re quite a bit different: we have a story, we have a campaign, and they’re a Roguelike. They made a bunch of different decisions than we did, and I’m glad, actually, that they’re different.

**What was the specific kind of feeling you were looking to inspire in players?**

I was hoping people would get a flow state in this game. That’s why I play rhythm games and what is best about them – and when I’m good at a shooter, when I’m in the zone, you want to be in that space where you’re there but not really there. Those two things are like playing music. My hope was that, when people were really playing the game, they’d have that sense of achievement, in the same way as when you get good at a rhythm game.

**What sort of things would you like to explore if there was a *Metal: Hellsinger* sequel?**

Definitely figuring out a way to have in-depth rhythm systems. I think if we could make that work, whether that was odd time signatures or other stuff, that would be great, even if it was just parts of the song that were more, like, playing along rather than [the soundtrack serving as] a metronome, which is how it is right now. There’s a lot of stuff that we could do that would be fun, like multiplayer. It’s very, very difficult, because of latency stuff and syncing – all that is just a nightmare. But if we could figure out a way to do it, it would be interesting.

them to a rhythm, and recorded scratch vocals. When it came time to pass the track along to the guest singers, Heafy recalls being shown several pieces of concept art, as well as screenshots of the game, to help inform his performance.

Vocalists were invited to suggest tweaks to the track, and given free rein in how they approached singing it. Heafy sings on *This Devastation*, alternating between throat-shredding howls and rich, baritone hooks. “[The song] left a lot of space to be theatrical in the beginning, especially, with it being lower, in that Danny Elfman, Jack Skellington,

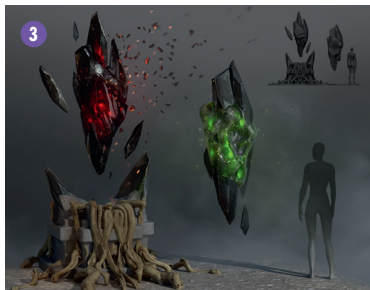
Night Before Christmas kind of range,” Heafy says. “So I was able to really get dramatic with it.”

Meanwhile, Tankian furnished his track, *No Tomorrow*, with a distinctive “da da da da” chant that makes it an instant headbanger. “We gave him two versions of the melody, and he could pick and choose from those ideas, how he wanted to perform it, and he also added lots of his interpretations of it into it,” Björkman explains. “The intro and the beginning was already there but was played on guitar, but then he did his ‘lala’ singing on top of it. That was his idea to do that.” It is, as Björkman puts it, a “very Serj thing to do” – and with Tankian snapping into his trademark growl in subsequent bars amid heavily distorted guitars, *No Tomorrow* could almost be mistaken for a new System Of A Down track.

**Having caught these stars** at a moment when they were locked down at home, *Metal: Hellsinger* launched into a world where those restrictions had started to loosen. And at Gamescom’s return to Cologne in 2022, it took full advantage of that fact, with a live concert featuring five vocalists from the game’s star-studded lineup performing alongside Two Feathers. For the game composers, it was a “surreal” experience. “I think I didn’t really understand what we were doing while we were doing it, in that sense, because I was just so focused on getting my parts right,” Björkman says. “There were a few times I looked up and was like, ‘Wait a minute, here I am – and that’s Matt from Trivium. Right, oh wait, my bass. I need to focus!’”

It was a true high note for the team behind the game, but there was still plenty of track left. Heafy, for his part, was so energised by the experience that he promptly asked to re-record his part. “Hey, let’s do all the vocals again because I wanna do them like I did them live,” he remembers saying. “Because I was so inspired by it.”

Beyond that, the developers have created several game updates: a new enemy demon, a top-tier difficulty mode that’s arguably even more devilish, and a modding tool that allows players to apply their own custom soundtrack to the action. “It does have the same limitations that the shipped game has,” Goldfarb caveats. “So you can have higher BPM and stuff, but doing odd time signatures, it’s not going to work properly because all the systems are based on 4/4.” Beyond that, though, you’re free to try any music you like. *Jazz: Hellsinger? Ska: Hellsinger? Boyband: Hellsinger?* The abyss is truly your oyster. ■



- 1 The arsenal in *Metal: Hellsinger* is your typical firstperson shooter lineup, but designed with a ghoulish twist.
- 2 Concept art for the icy plane of Voke, the setting for the game's first chapter.
- 3 Crystals can turn the tide of battles. Red orbs deal damage to nearby enemies; green ones have healing properties.
- 4 One of the game's fastest-moving demons, the Stalker can zip around to deliver quick, successive slashes.
- 5 The most exhilarating music is usually reserved for showdowns with the Red Judge, the game's main antagonist.
- 6 Further concept art illustrating *Metal: Hellsinger's* Infernal Planes

