

The Studio X

Virtual Reality Comes To Drumming

by Rick Van Horn

John Devecka is a mechanical designer whose idea for a robotic ice cream vending machine has taken the vending world by storm. As is often the case with creative individuals, John is also a musician, and he's recently focused both of those identities on the creation of the *Studio X*—a video arcade game offering the excitement of drumming in a concert environment.

John and his partner, Aldrin Roque, were actually guitar players who worked in bands together. But John also enjoyed the drums. "Four years ago I found an old snare drum in my house," he says, "and I started practicing. Then I borrowed a drumset from a friend of mine, and started playing along to CDs in my room. One night as I was playing, I came to a realization. I was having some problems with the ice-cream vending business, and I thought, 'We need other things to think about just in case things don't go well here.' I was trying to draw on things I love to do. I thought of music, but music and money don't always go together. I wanted to find a way to bring the joy of music to people. I would never have gotten into music had it not been for somebody showing that joy to me and teaching me how to get into it."

John realized that his ice cream machine gave him an automatic "in" to the amusement industry, and thus a way to reach children. "I saw my nieces and nephews having a very good time playing on my drums," he recalls. "I wanted to incorporate that euphoria into my new idea."

John also recalled his own dreams as a guitar player—to play on stage in a major



The *Studio X* is a self-contained electronic drum performance simulator, intended for placement in arcades and other amusement sites. The unit shown here is the initial demo model. Finished production models will feature a molded plastic booth and even more sophisticated environmental effects.

band, with the lights and the cheering audience. "I wanted to find a way to time-warp people right to that goal," he says, "with a simulation that would say to them, 'This is how cool it can be. If you enjoy this simulation, take the journey and you'll get there for real.' So I spray-painted a big wooden box, put in colored lights, added electronic drums and some recordings, and came up with the prototype for the *Studio X*. Then I threw a party at my house for twenty kids. They were in that booth, playing drums, *all day long*."

Seeing kids getting into the *Studio X* prototype gave John the confidence to do a patent search. Nothing similar had ever been done, so he pursued a patent. Since then, he's been working on developing the *Studio X*, part-time, for about a year and a half. Aldrin Roque added creative input towards the construction of a demo unit that could be shown to the arcade industry.

The finished *Studio X* consists of a highly decorated booth environment, a sound and lighting system, a computer monitor from which the player selects the



Inside the booth, the player selects a tune on the computer screen, then drums along on the electronic pads as the sound pours out of the stereo system. The "virtual reality" of being on stage for a concert performance is remarkable.

tunes, a hundred-disc CD player, Roland electronic drum pads (including a bass-drum pedal), and an Alesis D-4 as a sound source. There is also vending hardware to accept money and time the play, and a computer to control the overall operation. It's a sophisticated system that provides the player with the very real impression of performing at a major concert event.

"I think that the unit will appeal to arcade operators," says John. "There aren't many different categories of arcade games. I went

to a couple of arcades, and they had five rows of similar racing games. So just being in a different category offers a high value. The *Studio X* is also educational and interactive, which adds more value. We've already run several tests at major arcade venues in the New York City area, and the response has been tremendous. The issue with the operators is usually price. But if I get some advertising support from the drumming industry to keep the price low enough, I think the *Studio X* will be a



John Devecka (left) and Aldrin Roque, creators of the *Studio X*

tremendous success. Then it can be in many locations throughout the world, where it can promote drumming every day. I can guarantee that people who would never have touched a drumset will play the *Studio X*.

While many in the drum industry complain that video games draw off kids who might otherwise take an interest in drumming, John sees the *Studio X* as a potential *incentive* toward drumming. "Kids are used to going to arcade games," he stresses. "They get excited about the sounds, the lights, the look, and the participation. So that attraction is already in place. If, out of 2,500 kids who play the *Studio X* on a given weekend, 10% of them think, 'Hey, maybe I can do this for real,' that's 250 kids who might walk into a music store and inquire about drums or lessons. And if 10% of *those* kids decide to actually do whatever is necessary to start, that's twenty-five drummers that you didn't have yesterday. So the exposure factor is incrementally good, and it stands to make a good return for the drum industry in general. Eventually, I'd like to be able to produce a home version for a few hundred dollars—where you plug your own CD player in. It would be a fun way to get kids started in drumming.

"The best thing about the *Studio X*," John concludes, "is that there is no pressure. People who play it are not *really* playing anything. 'Gee, do I have to sit down and try to play a set of drums?' No you don't; you're just playing an arcade game. But all of a sudden, some of them are going to realize, 'Well, geez, I can *do* this.'"

