SoundMeister (with DigitalSession software)

By ECON Technologies

Typical Mail Order Price: $89.95

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Reviewed by Bill Moore

Looking for ways to get more sound into your IIGS? Perhaps you have sound effects CD's that you want to digitize from, or you just want to have a huge belch as your disk eject sound. In any case, a new board from ECON Technologies has come along to help satisfy those urges. ECON, noted for their utility programs AutoArk (see review in *GS+* V4.N2) and Universe Master (also reviewed in *GS+* V4.N2), has jumped into the sound market with the SoundMeister (SM) digitizing board. Included with the board is a copy of ECON's new sound editing program, DigitalSession (DS). With Applied Engineering getting out of the sound market (I infer this from the fact that they are liquidating their stock of Sonic Blaster cards), this card *appears* to be a worthy successor to AE's throne.

What Will This Board Do For Me?

The SoundMeister is a board that will enable you to digitize your own sounds in mono, and play back in stereo. This means if you have a game, music program, or digitized sound in stereo, the SM will allow you to listen to it in stereo (with appropriate external equipment, such as speakers or a stereo system). Input and output on this board is among the most flexible I've seen for a sound card for *any* computer. For input, you may use a low-level (microphone) or high level (such as a CD player) input. Output options are equally flexible, allowing one to hook up unpowered speakers directly, powered speakers like Bose Roommates, or you can hook your IIGS into your home stereo for best fidelity and response. (When I played some MOD songs using MODZap [reviewed in this issue] thru the SoundMeister at the office, Diz was blown away!)

I have only a couple of gripes about the package, but they are fairly major ones. First, although I recommended DigitalSession as a program of choice in my article "Catch the .WAV" (see last issue), DS was shipped to me *as a beta copy*! Now normally, this would put a program in the lead for a Trash Can Award [anybody remember those? - Ed.],

but this version seems to be fairly stable. I have had it crash on me, but no more frequently than Sonic Blaster's program does under System 6.0.1, or the America Online IIGS software (which will invariably hang unless I shift-boot).

I may be crazy, but I just don't like for people to pay for the "privilege" of being a beta-tester.

Of course, one nice thing about this is it may not be too late to suggest some improvements. When you use the keyboard shortcut Command-O to open a document, DS can only open it's own proprietary format. A more intelligent way to do this is the way Platinum Paint's open dialog does it (i.e. with a pop-up menu to ask the user which formats he or she wishes to open).

If that cannot be done, then at least define a keyboard equivalent for the current "Import Waveform" and "Import rSoundsample" menu items. Ninety percent of the time that I start up DS, it's to work with an existing sound file. It is very annoying to me to have to select these options from the File menu when I should logically just have to hit Command-O.

As long as I'm on the soapbox about this, I have the same gripes about saving work. If you hit Command-S, DS saves in it's proprietary format (which is worse than useless to me). And as long as we're rewriting the open dialog, let's go ahead and do the same to the save dialog, and allow the user to specify the format he'd like to save in. Again, 90% of the time I use DS, it's to either work with an rSoundsample, or to convert another type of sound into an rSoundsample—not to work with files in the DigitalSession format. The rSoundsample format has become the new standard file format for digitized sound on the IIGS, and in my opinion, ECON should better integrate working with this format into the DigitalSession program.

Also, EGOed has spoiled me with it's "Remember Open and Save Folders" preference. This is another option to add, in my opinion. I put DigitalSession through much of it's paces while working on the IIGS AudioClips packages for Sound Source Unlimited, and this program nearly drove me nuts having to load sounds from one folder, convert them, then save to another folder. Yet, if I had Kangaroo from Seven Hills, this wouldn't be much of a problem.

Finally, I feel that DigitalSession should have a way to open multiple files at once,

(limited by available memory of course). This was the other thing that quickly became a pet peeve while working on the AudioClips packages.

Impulse Power Only . . .

When we set everything up in one of the machines here at the office, we tried the board out to see how well it worked. And for about a week, no matter what we tried, we'd wind up with unintelligible garbage when we tried to digitize a sound. In desperation, I sent a sample of this to ECON, and received a prompt answer: the SoundMeister wasn't working correctly in our test machine with an accelerator. In order to do any digitizing with this board, we had to set the system speed to "Fast" (2.8MHz). So, we couldn't go at TransWarp speed and digitize. ECON tells me that this bug is due to code in DS that is supposed to disable an accelerator during digitizing, but doesn't work for some reason in our machine. I got somewhat better results on my machine at home (which has a 7MHz TransWarp GS and a Sonic Blaster), but they were still nothing to write home about.

Our problems with the input and the software may be isolated ones, but we've had no luck resolving them, even with ECON's excellent tech help. With the SoundMeister Pro forthcoming (it will probably be released by the time you read this), I'm inclined to wait and see what it will offer that the SoundMeister doesn't—namely, full stereo input and output, along with version 1.0 of DigitalSession.

Conclusion

I run my IIGS (along with my TV, VCR, Super Nintendo, etc.) sound output through my home stereo. My Sonic Blaster does a nice job on mono digitizing, but it won't play things like rSounds through both channels. I'd like to say the SoundMeister could supplant my Sonic Blaster, but for now, it can't. If you have the money and are patient, wait to see what the SM Pro can do. If you can't afford the Pro or don't want to wait, this board's about the same as the Sonic Blaster, with what will eventually be much better software, for about the same price. I really wanted to like this board and package, but the bugs in the software just don't let me. If ECON gets DigitalSession where it can cut the mustard, I'll recommend either board wholeheartedly. But for now, I'd adopt a "wait and see" attitude.   *GS+*