



The Death of “Industry Standard”

By Jeff Kaiser

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Introduction

For the past few decades, one particular audio software company has positioned itself as the “industry standard” through the combination of marketing and a vocal user base.

At its most benign, the term “industry standard” is used by corporate entities to demonstrate, maintain, or expand their market share. This is an important goal as seen in the recent acquisitions by venture capitalists of media software companies Native Instruments, Izotope, Brainworx, Plugin Alliance (Young 2023) and Avid, the makers of Pro Tools (Vinn and Sen 2023). This is also demonstrated by venture capitalists’ pursuit of other software companies such as Ableton (Knopper 2021), and for that matter, Ableton purchasing Cycling ’74, the makers of Max/MSP (Rogerson 2017).

At its worst, “industry standard” creates a conceptual framework that is used by companies and their user base to dismiss, shame, marginalize, mock, ridicule, exclude, and generally bully people that use one of the many other digital audio workstations

(DAWs) that are not considered by these companies—and many of their users—as “standard.”

The term “industry standard” can also perpetuate certain styles of working and creating, and the “standardization” of these workflows is sometimes used to scoff at the very innovations that the large companies later incorporate into their DAWs.

The above might sound overly dramatic to some, but pedagogically it becomes a question of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in—and out—of the classroom. What about students using inexpensive, free, or open-source platforms? Are they made to feel “less” by their use of a platform that is not “industry standard?” Does such treatment motivate students to use hacked commercial software?¹ How do we encourage creative and technological work both at school studios, and away from school studios, in a way that includes students who are unable to afford access at home to “industry standard” DAWs and their required hardware?

I ask you to look from the perspective of students entering music technology programs, students that not only bring experience and knowledge, but grew up with access to a far greater selection of software than the generation before: from commercial offerings to the peripheries of the open-source underground. Today’s audio students are growing up in a different world from the one I grew up in, a world far less dominated by single audio companies. I ask this: if you don’t recognize yourself in the questions I am asking, imagine the student’s perspective instead of your own. Their reality is creating all of our futures in the audio industry. And it is for this future that I propose we as educators stop perpetuating the idea of “industry standard” in the classroom (and elsewhere) to refer to specific commercial DAWs.²

Drawing from modern pedagogical studies, long-tail economics, and the history of select contemporary DAWs, I will use examples from social media, popular magazines, and professional organizations to support my arguments, which are rooted in my extensive experience in the classroom and professional recording studios.

Problematizing “Industry” and “Standard”

The use of the term “industry standard” creates a monolithic view of what the music industry is, what it does, what tools are used, and who counts as a member of the “industry” as defined by their use of “standard” tools.

¹ Are our policies making necessary criminals out of students?

² I do believe “industry standard” should be used as a term for technical standards of the music industry, such as audio files, cables, connectors, et cetera. Which opens up a challenging, difficult, and related discussion, i.e., who creates these standards?

In dedicated audio organizations, confirmation bias takes place when members and the tools they use are equated with the industry at large. Since most of them, their friends, and colleagues, use this one software, they believe it is the “industry standard.” This idea is amplified by the constant repetition of the term “industry standard” in the aforementioned marketing campaigns, and reinforced by product users with strong social media connections.

Large corporations that perpetuate the idea of “industry standard” discredit the innovations of smaller companies while later incorporating those very same innovations as their own. Smaller companies are quicker to introduce innovative changes: think of Ableton when they started, and when others followed. The users of the “industry standard” at first scoff at innovators, calling other platforms “toys,” then incorporate their ideas later. Examples include folder tracks, clip-based workflows, et cetera (Tyler 2020; Cotton 2023). Again, working to maintain market share. This becomes an *argumentum ab auctoritate* where big names are used to justify the use of “industry standard.” This can be seen in such recent ads by Avid featuring Miraval Studio, Andrew Scheps, and Brad Pitt. It also creates a circular, even tautological, argument: the company is the expert in its DAW, the company says its DAW is “industry standard,” therefore the DAW is “industry standard.”

The message of the above argument, when repeated enough, becomes a framework employed by users of that DAW, where the repetition itself becomes the evidence. As George Lakoff states, “Framing is the most commonplace thing we do with thought and language. Frames are the cognitive structures we think with... The more the language of a frame is repeated, the stronger the frame gets, along with the system the frame is in (Lakoff 2010).” Corporations, like politicians and preachers, know this to be true.

The use of software deemed “industry standard” then provides users with an ideological pendant, providing a direct sign of their allegiances to “industry standard,” an association with “industry standard,” and an association with other famous users of “industry standard.” All of the above leads to a “team” mentality in the audio world similar to that of sports, politics, and even religion.

Long Tail Economics and Home Studios

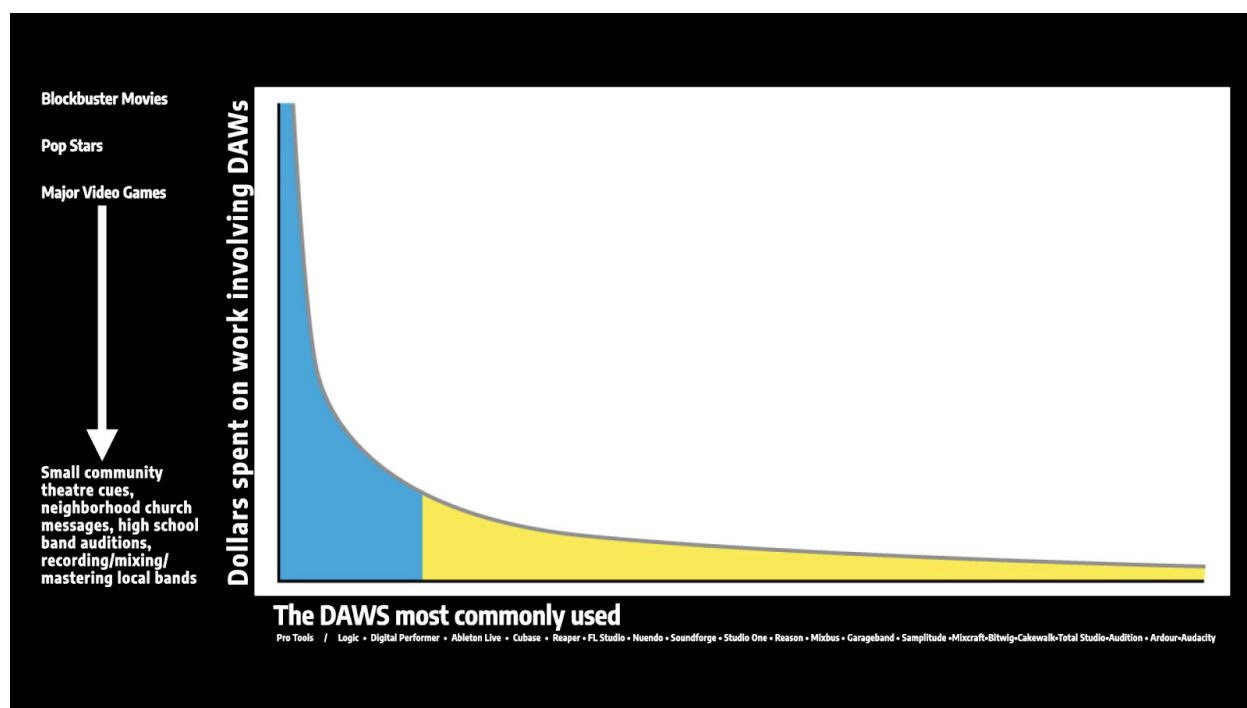
The music industry is much bigger than what many people who use the term “industry standard” might think. In my experience they use the term to refer to a narrow band of the “industry,” a small but financially large part that is then used to define the whole of what is actually much larger, more complex, and diverse in practice.

I build the following idea of a diverse and complex music industry from a combination of evidence, observation, anecdotal stories, and conjecture built off the idea of long tail

economics, a term first used in 2004 by author Chris Anderson in an article in *Wired* (Anderson 2004) and further developed in his book, *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business is Selling Less of More* (Anderson 2006).

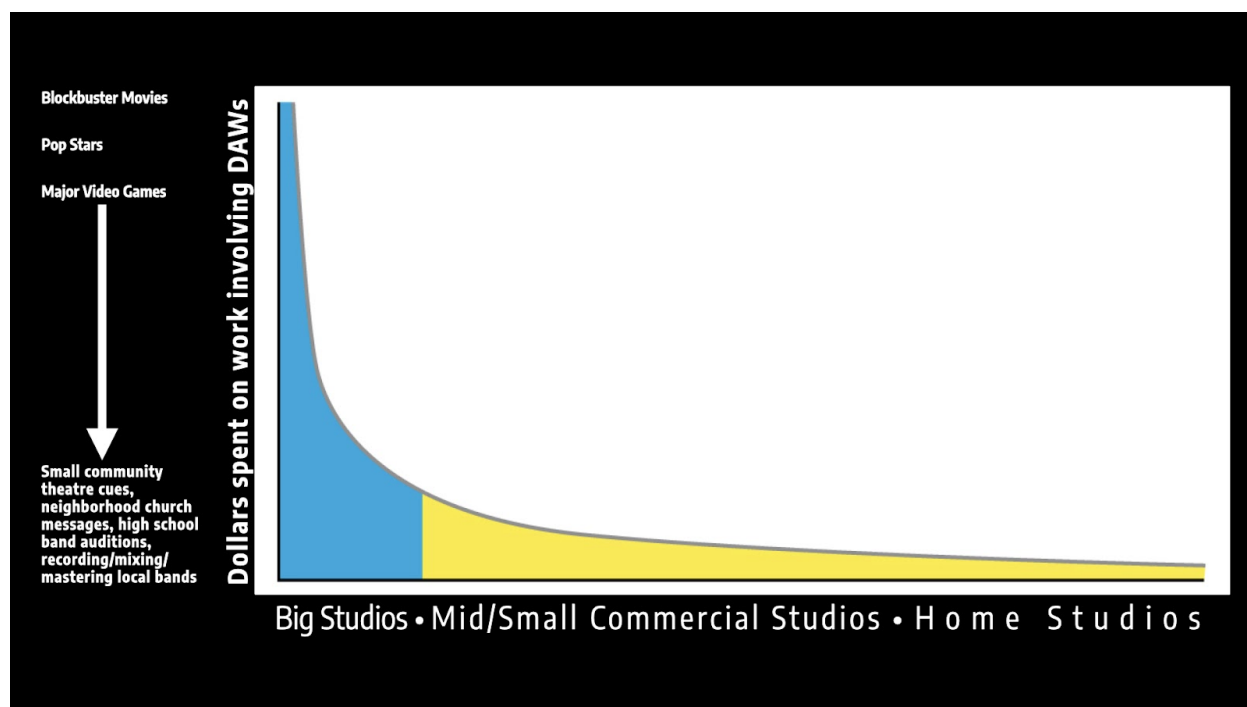
Here is a partial list of DAWs available today: Pro Tools, Logic, Digital Performer, Ableton Live, Cubase, Reaper, FL Studio, Nuendo, Soundforge, Studio One, Sequoia, Reason, Mixbus, Garageband, Samplitude, Mixcraft, Bitwig, Cakewalk, Total Studio, BandLab, Audition, Ardour, Audacity, along with many variants of each. A mix varying from expensive to open-source. Anecdotally speaking, I know many users that have either full-time or part-time income from using these DAWs, even the beloved and sometimes beleaguered Audacity is used in some professional environments.

The following is an image of a power law distribution:



Power law distribution is a term, as Anderson writes, that refers to “a curve where a small number of things occur with high amplitude and a large number of things with low amplitude (Anderson 2006, 121).” In my example here, we see a vertical axis of dollars spent on work using DAWs that includes a variety with few at the top—blockbuster movies, big dollar pop music productions, major video games—all the way done to the many smaller budget items—including podcasts, small community theater audio/music cues, neighborhood church messages, high school band concerts and auditions, recording/mixing/mastering local bands, and more. The horizontal axis is of DAWs most commonly used from the list above.

My conjecture is that this illustrates the music industry as a whole is much larger than the few jobs at the top. In other words, the music industry is not just the large budget projects that might be more homogenous in their DAW selection. Another way to view the horizontal axis would be by studio size: from large commercial studios to smaller home-based studios.³



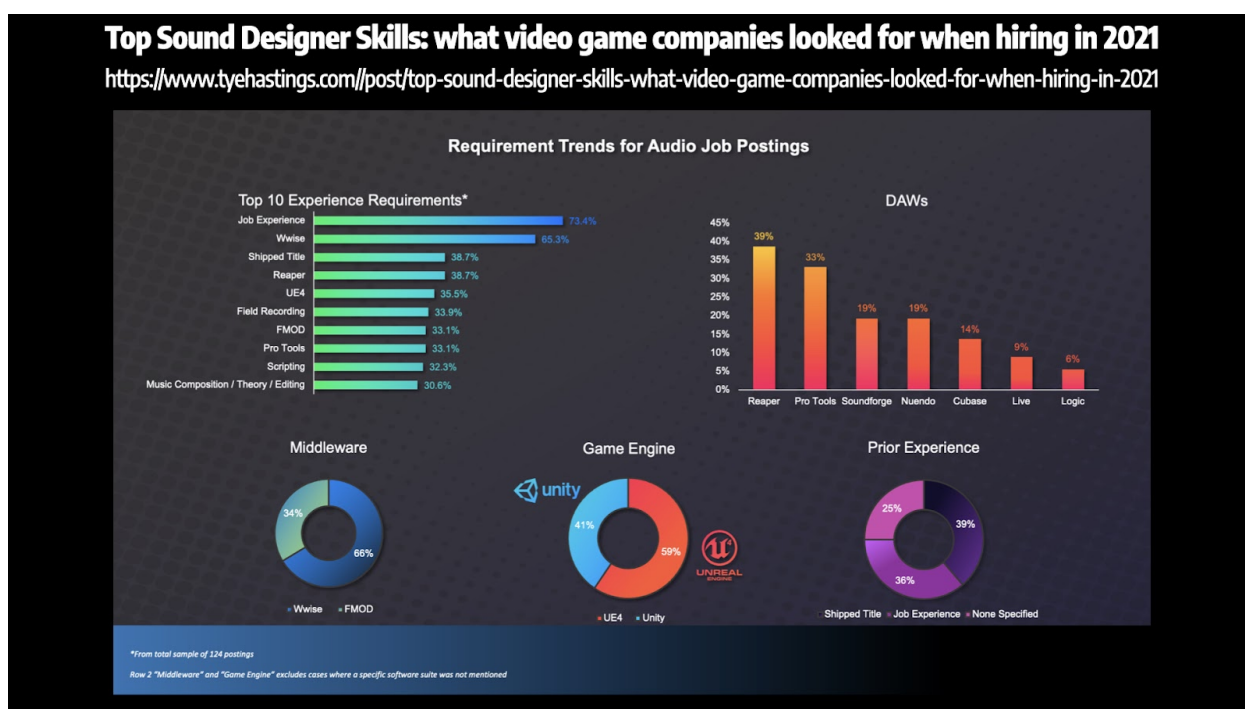
If we view the industry as more than just big dollar popular productions and studios, all of a sudden, the inclusion of job possibilities into our concept grows, as does what defines the music industry, who is counted as being in the industry, along with the variety of DAW preferences.

This is an important point, again, because of DEI. As someone who has recruited for programs now for over ten years, the lack of inclusion of DAWs helps create imposter syndrome (a form of negative metacognition) in potential students. As cognitive science researcher and author Stanislas DeHaene writes, “Metacognition remains the main culprit for struggling students, after a while, they no longer have any reason to be curious (Dehaene 2020)” I would argue they lose curiosity due to the perceived lack of access to resources by those telling them they need expensive equipment, and at the same time being told the resources they are using are not good enough, i.e., not “industry standard.” There are many subtle ways that this sort of gatekeeping happens

³ It should be noted in addition, that as of the time of this writing, there are legal allegations that certain large corporations have misrepresented their assets/market share to shareholders to enable the sale of the company (Miller 2023; Kahn 2023).

in addition to the bludgeon of the term “industry standard,” i.e., qualifying terms such as, “well, that DAW is ok for now.” The crushing of curiosity is a large impediment to education.

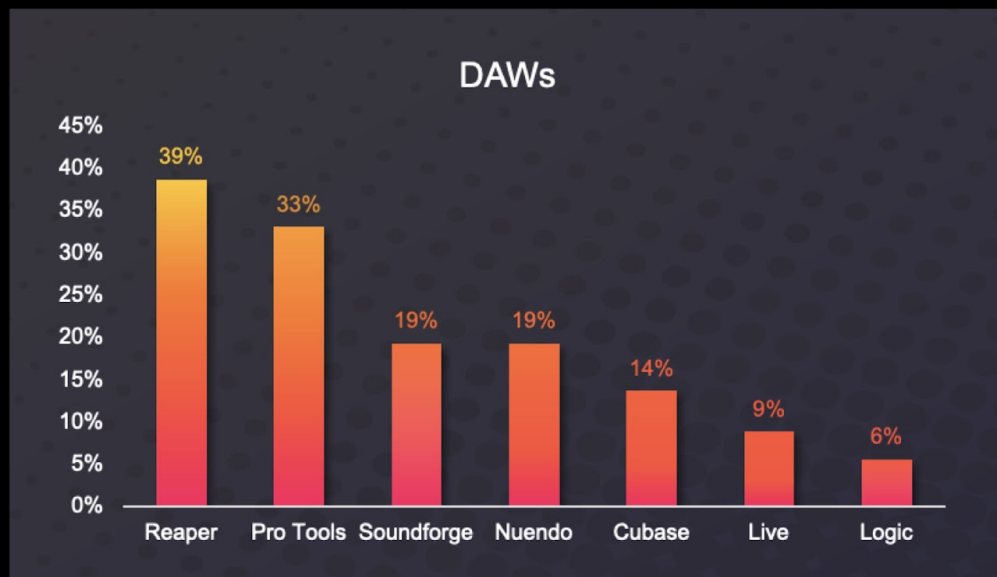
In spite of the fact that we have evidence that there is more than one aspect of the industry—and skills in other DAWs are getting called for in job advertisements (Hastings 2022)—the term “industry standard” is still used to dismiss, shame, marginalize, mock, ridicule, exclude, and generally bully people using so many of the platforms that are not considered “standard.” We see this on social media groups and forums where these DAWs are still referred to as toys, for amateurs, fine for non-professional work, and more which tells a large part of the industry that what they are using is not “standard” and all the social ideas and normalization that goes with that term.



Graphs from Tye Hastings' Blog (Hastings 2022)

Top Sound Designer Skills: what video game companies looked for when hiring in 2021

<https://www.tyehastings.com/post/top-sound-designer-skills-what-video-game-companies-looked-for-when-hiring-in-2021>



Pedagogical Concerns

The term “industry standard” also perpetuates sameness. An article that provoked quite a bit of dialogue came out in *The Verge* in 2021 titled “‘Pro Tools proficiency’ may be keeping us from diversifying audio,” arguing very clearly what is stated in its title (McDowell 2021). Similarly, professor, musician, and author, Kaley Lane Eaton argues in her article, “Hit the reset button: Rethinking how we teach music technology” that,

...in higher education, the norm is to teach ‘industry standard’ software: invest in expensive on-campus studios by getting ‘deals’...Avid or Apple, teach the students what they will need to know to have a career as an audio engineer, producer, or film composer—and then leave them...in debt and no access to these tools when they graduate...Luckily, there are still ways of engaging with music technology and building a robust and well-rounded expertise without joining the scheme. (Eaton 2022)

Pedagogically, educational systems favoring concepts of “industry standard” are problematic on many levels, not the least because they support a structural rigor, rather than creative and intellectual rigor. I believe we need to develop ideas of critical pedagogy in teaching music technology. Pedagogy simply means an approach to teaching and critical here means what is essential, or most important, to that pedagogy. To unpack further, author and professor Jesse Stommel writes in his article *Critical Digital Pedagogy: a Definition*, “Critical, as in mission-critical...Critical, as in a

reflective and nuanced approach to a thing; Critical, as in criticizing institutional or corporate impediments to learning (Stommel 2014).”

I believe that the following are critical to music technology in education:⁴

1. It must be Equitable

It should create awareness of—and access to—music technology instructional resources to as broad a group as possible. There should be as many free and inexpensive resources as possible, encouraging and supporting the potential of students who may lack the means to purchase expensive options.

2. It must be Accessible in different ways

Geographically—Such a pedagogy should incorporate a focus on what can be learned away from studio locations with the inherent financial investment they require. I do not want to take away from the importance of studio located coursework—access to expensive equipment is a joy, but it is also a privilege not available to all. One goal I envision is that students who own or have access to a laptop can not only produce music, but complete their coursework in their bedroom, at their kitchen table, in their favorite park, coffeehouse or library—anywhere, in fact, without requiring additional costly software or an extra trip to school.

Financially—It should be accessible to people of varying financial means.

Ability—it should be usable by people of varying abilities.

3. It must be Cross-Platform

The pedagogy I envision should not simply dictate investment in a specific computer brand, OS, or software in its choice of teaching tools. In addition to expensive software that many consider “standard,” it should introduce and instruct students on the use of affordable professional software that supports different operating systems and importantly: different vintages of computers.

4. It must be Creative

Encourage students to express musical creativity while learning music technology fundamentals.

⁴ This list was originally developed for my website, WhyReaper.com

5. It must be Innovative

Reinforce the value of innovation while acknowledging and learning from the rich lineage and history contributed by the musicians, music technologists, producers, engineers, artists, and innovators in other fields that have gone before.

6. It must be Professional

This pedagogy should offer transferable skills that will enable students not only to work in various professional environments, but also at a distance from the studio.

7. It must be Entrepreneurial

A pedagogy of this kind should encourage—or at least introduce—an entrepreneurial approach, presenting scenarios in which students might own their own means of producing music rather than be locked into studios owned by others. It should attempt to create independent thinkers who can embrace solutions outside of expensive options.

8. It must be Critically-Engaged

What does it mean to be critically-engaged in music technology?

For me, it means to explore and ask questions about the frameworks, power structures, and contexts in which music technology is created and used.

Technology is not created in a void, it is created by people living in cultures with shared meanings, values, aesthetics, tools, art, institutions, and other structures. How do these things inform and influence what is being made and how it is being used? Who made it, why did they make it, and for what purpose?

The recording studio itself (even if it is in your bedroom or the classroom) is a location of cultural production, both in terms of cultural products such as recorded music as well as the production of meanings and values of a culture.

Conclusion

Not addressing these issues in music technology education is a tacit acceptance of the ideas of “industry standard” perpetuated by corporations. Teaching software platforms without engaging these problems becomes a silent and complicit advocacy for these commercial platforms and all the problems mentioned above. As Richard Shaull wrote,

“There is no such thing as a neutral educational process (Freire 2000).” It is incumbent upon us to constantly examine, question, and refresh our pedagogies, creative practices, and the tools that are part of them.

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