

# COMPOSER PROFILE



## Jason Graves The Dead Space composer who thrilled the world with his haunting soundtrack.

**Musically, where did it all start for you?**

I've had music rattling around in my head since I was a kid. Even taking piano lessons in elementary school, I had more fun making stuff up than I did practicing. I think that holds true for anyone taking lessons, especially kids. I just have the amazing benefit of being able to make stuff up as an adult and get paid for it!

I've always loved listening to music,

especially classical and film music. John Williams' score to E.T. really transformed my idea of the power of music. I remember seeing it in the theater as a kid. It really made an impact on me.

**What's had a major influence on you as a musician?**

I've spent my life growing up listening to film scores and am an avid collector as well. Ballet music, which is essentially the predecessor of film music, is also wonderfully programmatic and emotional. I'm especially drawn to the Russian ballets. I love those "goose bump" moments in film and classical music. I used to spend a lot of time deconstructing those moments and figure out why they had such an effect on me. I'm always trying to repeat those same kinds of moments in my own music.

For me, it's always about the emotion. My first and foremost thought is, "What I can emotionally convey to the player?" I love music that moves me, music that ebbs and flows, music that tells a story. I see each score as a chance to tell a new story and take the listener on a journey, even if they don't consciously realize where they are going. I think music should affect you when you listen to it and evoke some sort of emotional response. That emotional response is my motivation - it's how I approach every score I compose.

**How do you approach a new project?**

There's definitely a huge amount of influence from a game's backstory and history. In the best case scenario, I can completely immerse myself in the world of the game. Developers send pictures, movies, scripts and rough story lines to give me the most information possible before I start composing.

When I first begin composing for a new title, my only intention is to try and capture the emotional aspects of the gameplay experience and translate that into music for the player. There are always times when the implementation calls for a specific type of cue or a technical breakout of music tracks to make an interactive scene play properly. But most of the time my sole focus is on helping to deliver the most encompassing, cinematic experience possible.

If I'm working on an existing franchise, like Star Trek or Aliens, that also gives me the excuse to go online or to the local comic book shop and buy as many toys as I can find. Not to mention whatever previous games or movies I can find at the store or see in the theater. I have one of the few jobs where toys, games and Blu-Rays are considered a business expense!

**You're work on Dead Space is award winning, was this your proudest achievement? Why do you think your work did so well?**

It was definitely my most original, which is what I think a lot of people responded to. I think there are three key ingredients needed for a game score to get any kind of recognition: a creative opportunity for the composer, solid implementation from the developer and a well-made, well-received game.

You really need all three elements together on the same title, which doesn't happen very often. Lucky for me, Dead Space had all three. It's always difficult for me to predict how a specific game I've scored will be received once it's released. I assumed the score for Dead Space would be largely marginalized by critics and fans, only because it was so incredibly dissonant and non-musical. Ironically, that's exactly what made it unique and why it received so much attention.

# Jason Who? Here's the composer's backlog of scores to remind those out of the loop →



## Are you a gamer?

I've been playing games since I was a kid. Now that I've got two kids of my own, we have a really great time playing together. Sometimes I think they get more excited watching me than they do actually playing themselves!

As a composer writing music for games, the time I spend playing games is inversely proportional to the time I spend composing for games. In other words, when I'm really busy on my own games there's less time for others. But I've got one of every console at home and a library of games, so when there is time for me to play I have plenty of choices.

## Video game music is growing in popularity, why do you think that is?

Game music will continue to become more popular as the medium itself

matures and comes into its own. Unlike film and television, composers for games are completely dependent on technology to relate their music to the people listening. It was only a few years ago when we were stuck in the

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"turn music on here, turn music off there" confines of PS2 and Xbox. Now we're finally getting into true dynamic music that follows gameplay and reacts accordingly. That's the kind of score that will turn ears and get a composer noticed.

## What do you think makes a great score?

When I think of specific scores, a certain theme or chord progression comes to mind that I really enjoy

listening to. For me, a good score walks the line between supporting the action for the in-game experience and standing on its own as a listening experience away from the game. Sometimes, it can be quite the challenge to make both of those things happen!

## What do you think makes a great video game composer?

For me, the biggest aspect of a composer's job actually has nothing to do with music. It's all about collaboration and being a team player. As cliché as that may sound, it's totally true! A good composer will listen to what the developer wants for the game and temper that with their own input. Their music should really sell the gaming experience to the player; give them something that totally immerses them in the game. That's my personal goal for each new title I work on. Hopefully I'm getting a little closer each time!