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The Music of Dead Space: Interview with Composer Jason Graves

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Dead Space is a bold and bloody sci-fi survival horror game that delivers the ultimate in psychological thrills and gruesome action. In *Dead Space*, players step into the role of engineer Isaac Clarke, an ordinary man on a seemingly routine mission to fix the communications systems aboard a deep space mining ship called the USG Ishimura. Set approximately 500 years in the future, Isaac discovers that the crew of the mining spaceship is found horribly slaughtered and transformed into terrifying monsters. Now Isaac is cut off, trapped, and engaged in a desperate fight for survival.



The intensely atmospheric orchestral score for *Dead Space* was composed and conducted by award-winning composer **Jason Graves**. Renowned for his cinematic and prolific orchestral music on action/adventure video game titles such as *Blacksite: Area 51*, the *Blazing Angels* franchise and the *Star Trek* franchise, Jason also creates award-winning music for film and television. Jason studied under film composers Jerry Goldsmith, Elmer Bernstein, Christopher Young and orchestrator Will Schaefer while earning a degree from the University of Southern California's prestigious film scoring program. He has scored more than 150 commercials, 90 television shows, movie trailers, and feature films, conducting orchestras at Capitol Records, Paramount Pictures, Skywalker Sound, Seattle and Salt Lake City. His music has been awarded three Telly's, an Addy, nine Silver Reels, a Gold Case Award, and a Cable A.C.E. Award. Jason also won 2nd Prize in Turner Classic Movies' 2005 Young Film Composer Competition, of which there were more than 500 entries. His video game awards include two G.A.N.G. "Best Original Theme" nominations for *Star Trek: Legacy* and *Blazing Angels 2*,



G.A.N.G. "Music of the Year" nomination for *King Arthur* and winner of G.A.N.G. "Soundtrack of the Year" award for *The Hobbit*.

M4G recently caught up with Jason Graves for an in-depth interview about the creation of one of the most challenging and intense original scores in recent memory.



M4G: First of all please tell us about your musical background and how you got into scoring music for film and video games?

Jason Graves: I've been reading *Film Score Monthly* magazine since it was a three page, photocopied and stapled "newsletter" many years ago. In 1994, they did an article on an up-and-coming composer named Christopher Lennertz, who had just graduated from the University of Southern California's "Music for Motion Pictures and Television" department. That article inspired me to apply to the same program for the following year.

While at USC, I made lots of great contacts. About halfway through the program I was working on two television series and already finished a few commercials, plus I was starting to get jobs scoring trailers. By the time I graduated, I had gotten another television series and was working on a big ad campaign for Activision, around eight national spots for their newest games. It was so much fun composing for those commercials. Each one had a totally different score, from a 1970's racing game to a horror game to a fantasy title. Though I technically was scoring video game commercials, that was my introduction to the world of game music.

Film music just kind of naturally evolved from the business I already had with television and commercials. A lot of it is simply people I've known for a long time who were finally in the position to make their own films. It was the music for films that allowed me to focus more on orchestral music. I had a lot of opportunities to work with live orchestras, which eventually led to my first gig working on a video game.

I was approached about seven years ago, mostly due to my background in composing and conducting for live orchestras. At the time I was concentrating on getting film and television work, but I remembered those Activision spots I had worked on six years earlier and how much fun they were. Needless to say, it was a total blast working on the game. After that first job I was hooked - I moved my focus from film and television to games.



M4G: You previously studied under the likes of legendary Jerry Goldsmith, who scored *Alien* and *Planet of the Apes* as well as Christopher Young who has scored many horror movies. How much influence did they have on your career and were they an inspiration during your work on *Dead Space*?

Jason Graves: One of things I heard Jerry talk about over and over again is how absolutely terrified he was when starting a new film score. He was convinced THIS project was the one where "they would discover "I am a fraud" and his career would be over. Now, this is Jerry GOLDSMITH we're talking about! I think that's one of many reasons he was such a wonderfully gifted composer - he was constantly trying to improve his craft and learn something new.

When I told John Williams how excited I was about hearing his score to the first Harry Potter movie, he replied, "Well, Jason, I'll do my best." Like he wasn't quite sure if his talents could

live up to my expectations - John Williams! I once saw him eating breakfast, studying a conductor's score from Holst's "The Planets" with a red pen, marking up the brass parts. We all know he didn't NEED to be studying, but he has this constant drive to learn more, improve his craft and better himself through his music.

Chris was, and I'm sure still is, constantly trying new things to keep himself interested in music and be a better composer. He told me when he first came to L.A., he positively worshipped Goldsmith and did everything he could possibly do to sound exactly like him. If you listen to Chris' earlier work you can definitely hear Jerry's influence, but it's tempered with Chris' own style. Chris has an extensive library of conductor's scores. He let me borrow...actually, I should say he DEMANDED that I photocopy some of his scores. He handed me the score to Alien and said, "This, my friend, is all the school you really need."

If guys like Goldsmith, Williams and Young are still so obsessed over being better composers how can anyone else be content with just sitting around? I've always tried to live by their examples. Each project I get is another chance to be a better composer, a better collaborator, a better team player. If I'm not constantly learning something new and improving my craft what's the point?



M4G: How did you get involved with scoring the music for *Dead Space*?

Jason Graves: My agent got a call from EA. They had a new IP and were looking for a really, really scary score. I submitted a combination of music I had already composed for other projects and some music I wrote specifically for *Dead Space*. A month or so later **Dead Space Audio Director Don Veca** called and was raving about how perfect the music submission was. He said it was exactly what he was looking for and wanted to arrange a trip out to EA to meet the team and play the game.



M4G: What was the music brief for *Dead Space*? Were there any specific musical references? How much direction were you given by EA? How much experimentation and creative freedom were you allowed?

Jason Graves: The initial music pitch had general guidelines, but nothing too specific. Obviously, it had to be scary, but thankfully Don wanted to avoid the cliché "heavy metal horror" sound. Chris Young's name came up a lot, specifically his scores for "The Grudge" and "The Exorcism of Emily Rose." Both are detailed studies in masterful composition for suspense/horror. Having studied with Chris, I was familiar with many of the techniques he used with the orchestra.

Overall, the music for *Dead Space* evolved over a two-year period. The first year was definitely the "experimental" time. The eight or nine month period following that is when all the final music was composed for the game. During the first year the overall sound of the score went through several revisions - that time also included the first of two live orchestral recording sessions. There was a wonderful initial meeting with Don, where we just hung out at his house and played lots of music. I've got a pretty exhaustive collection of classical music and film scores that I brought with me on my iPod. We spent a few days playing music and talking about the general direction of the score, including Don's ideas about splitting the music into four layers of intensity for an adaptive score.

By the time the trip was over we had picked out specific pieces that conveyed the emotions

Don thought appropriate for *Dead Space*. From the beginning we both agreed the score should sound as cinematic and emotional as possible. Don was very clear that he was concerned much more about how the music made him FEEL and a lot less about what instruments were playing or how it was composed. On the flight home I thought about how I could possibly conduct a huge live orchestra and still have the control that Don wanted for the final music implementation. I sketched out ideas on a hotel napkin sitting on the plane. Ironically, that napkin became the "bible" by which I planned the entire first recording session for *Dead Space*.

That first year of trial and error had a lot of feedback from Don, who's a wonderful musician and composer himself and was able to express his ideas very clearly. The original idea for the score was more of an orchestral hybrid with electronic elements supporting the orchestra in the background. The music was also a lot more thematic and more typical of something you would hear playing behind a sci-fi adventure movie. It seemed to work on its own, but once it was playing under the game it took on this heroic aspect that was just too familiar and expected. It made you think, "Hey, cool - More bad guys to take down!"

We didn't want to boost the player's morale, we wanted to convince them they were about to die at any second. The score needed to be more raw, visceral and disconcerting. We wanted it to make players completely uncomfortable. It never really came together until the music from the first recording session was implemented into the game. Don and I played through a level that had a few minutes of exploring and then an encounter with a Necromorph. I could barely recognize my own music - it blended seamlessly into the environment. Every dark corner made me apprehensive, every shadow looked like something was about to attack. When the Necromorph came around the corner and the orchestra started building up, I got goose bumps. It was exactly the effect we were hoping for, plus so much more.

Normally, I submit demos of all the music that will be recorded with a live orchestra. That way the Audio Director has at least a general idea of how the final product will sound. The score to *Dead Space* had so many experimental techniques there wasn't any way to provide a "preview" of the music. I was literally writing everything down on paper, thinking up different ways to get really unique, spooky sounds out of a live ensemble.

In the beginning I would call Don and run ideas by him, getting his opinion on specific techniques and sounds I thought the orchestra could produce. Finally he just said, "Look man, I know whatever you come up with will sound great. I'll hear it at the scoring session." As a result, no one heard what the music sounded like until the orchestra was playing it live, and that included myself! Fortunately, Don and I had spent a year perfecting the approach to the score, so there was a definite "sound" I knew I was going for.

I've never had such a wonderful opportunity to do ANYTHING I wanted with a live orchestra. Even with the overall sound of the score in mind, that kind of freedom is unheard of in games or films. However, that creative freedom brought with it an incredible amount of responsibility. I felt a lot of pressure to plan and execute the recording sessions without a hitch. It didn't help that I couldn't find anyone who had already tried something like this, so in addition to the pressure I already felt, I was breaking new ground and trying something no one had before. In the end everything went smoothly, the sessions were an incredible success and EA loved my final score, so I'm incredibly happy!



M4G: How much music did you write for the game and how long did the process take?

Jason Graves: First I should explain how the music was composed. Most pieces were broken down into the four levels of intensity I mentioned earlier. Each level had the ability to play by itself and stand on its own, but also had to be able to dove-tail into the other levels, kind of like a puzzle. The audio engine allows all four of these levels to play simultaneously and the gameplay decides which ones are playing at any given time, how loud they are relative to each other, etc. If a piece is two minutes long, there's actually eight minutes of music that make up that two minute piece, they're just stacked on top of each other.

The last count I did totaled about three hours of music for *Dead Space*. I was counting any of the adaptive, multi-layered pieces as being four minutes long instead of eight, since every one had at least two general "ideas," - ambient and combat. The final composition period lasted from February to May of this year, but there were a few last-minute things to wrap up in June.



M4G: For those unfamiliar with Aleatoric and 20th Century orchestra music techniques, can you describe the process of writing and recording these styles of music, and how they work and sound in the game?

Jason Graves: There are a lot of fancy words thrown around when talking about this kind of music: aleatoric, avant-garde, extended techniques. Essentially what all of them come down to is two things. The music itself is non-traditional - there's no true melody, rhythm or chord progression you would recognize. It's very free form, sometimes called "chance music," in the sense that players are given the freedom to improvise what they play, normally within a given sets of instructions. For example, repeating a specific set of notes in any order as fast as possible.

The second aspect of this kind of music is the way the orchestra plays their instruments - that's where the extended techniques come in. Anything you can think of is fair game. Brass players blow through just their mouthpieces, strings tap their bows on the body of their instruments, woodwinds producing all kinds of wonderfully horrible squeaks and shrill screams by overblowing their instruments. The overall idea is more of a textural, immediate sound that traditional playing cannot evoke.

When planning the score for *Dead Space* I researched all the 20th Century music I could find over a five month period, completely immersing myself in the world of experimental, avant-garde orchestral music. I broke it down into basic building blocks, which were the techniques the orchestra performed and the way the composer put them all together. I had a firm grasp on the technical aspects, but I was still unsure how the score for *Dead Space* was going to be "put together." So I recorded all the techniques individually, thereby allowing the game itself to be the deciding factor in how the score was "performed." It was a great extension of the general idea of aleatoric music, which is a piece that's never performed the same way twice due to its "chance" elements. The final score to *Dead Space* operates much like a live aleatoric, orchestral performance - every time you play the game, it will never sound the same way twice.



M4G: Tell us about conducting and recording with the Northwest Sinfonia and Skywalker Symphony Orchestra. What was the experience like and how did it compare to previous orchestra sessions? We heard that you recorded 10 hours of material!

Jason Graves: Obviously, the orchestra was performing extremely tense, scary music. However, both recording sessions were among the most fun and "low-pressure" that I'd conducted. Both myself and all the musicians laughed so much between takes I had to make it a habit to make sure we got enough silence after a piece was finished, otherwise the ending would be spoiled with snickers and chuckles, which wouldn't be very appropriate for *Dead Space*.

I think a lot of it had to do with how much FUN aleatoric music is to perform, which is funny given the final results of the score. This wasn't Mozart - players had a huge amount of freedom to improvise on their instruments, both in what they played and HOW they played. The orchestra really got into it, too. Some of the most fun the strings had was playing with these wooden dowels I had made for the session - they were an inexpensive substitute for the backs of the bows that string players use. I had them tapping and playing everything possible, from the sides of their instruments to the music stands, and I was conducting it all live during a fifteen minute take. Everybody was smiling the whole time - I think we all felt like

kids again, and having some fun.

Since I was taking such a deconstructive approach to the orchestral recordings there was a lot of preparation and planning that had to be finished beforehand. In order to have the most amount of control over the music everything needed to be as isolated as possible. This not only meant I needed individual control of the brass and strings, but also independent recordings of the entire string section: violins, violas, celli and contrabasses.

As a result, there was an enormous amount of material to record, which in turn meant an enormous amount of scores and parts to prepare. Paul Taylor, my orchestrator, and I worked very closely to be as specific as possible in notating exactly what I wanted the orchestra to play. We figured the less time I spent talking the more time I could spend recording. A lot of avant-garde music has its own kind of notation - more like visual pictures than traditional written music. These pictures leave a lot of explanation to the conductor and require much rehearsal time to achieve the desired effect the composer intended.

One of Paul's biggest responsibilities was to take my pictorial notation and convert it into simple, traditional, easy-to-understand notation. His idea was that I would call out a cue, maybe provide a ten second description of what I wanted, and we would record it. It was a brilliant idea that streamlined the entire process and ended up giving us both about four times the work we had anticipated!

Since the sessions became such a model of efficiency we ended up with a lot of time to fill. Most live sessions assume four to six minutes of music will be "in the can" each hour. For *Dead Space*, I was able to record about forty minutes of original material every hour. I had every cue timed out to the minute it was supposed to finish - we moved at a fairly brisk pace, to say the least! Leslie Ann Jones, the recording engineer at Skywalker Sound, said she had never experienced such a tightly run and organized session. I even got some e-mails from the players expressing their amazement at the organization and efficiency of the sessions, which made me very happy.

So I had sixteen hours of recording between both orchestras and a choir at Skywalker, averaging about forty minutes per hour. That totals up to a little more than ten hours of material. But keep in mind, if this were any other style of music I wouldn't have been able to approach it in the same way. The nature of aleatoric music is chance and non-traditional textures, so it was the perfect kind of score to dissect in such a way.

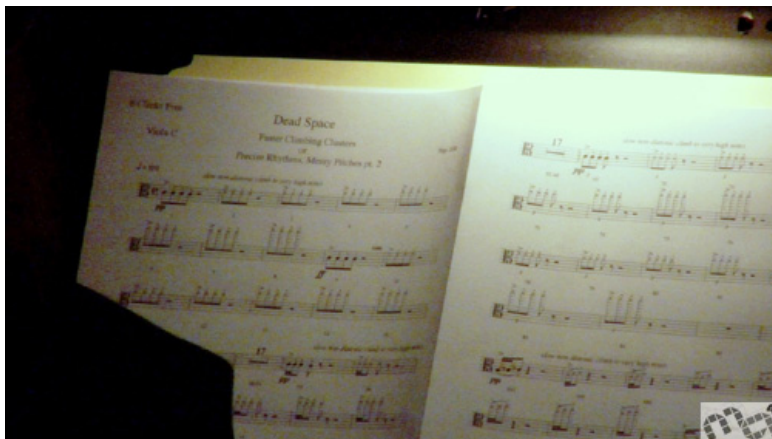


M4G: The orchestra is interwoven so closely with the sound design that many gamers do not realize they are listening to the orchestra playing experimental pieces. What techniques did EA employ to deliver this seamless "musical sound design" experience?

Jason Graves: The music blends so well with the sound effects for two reasons: the way it was composed and how it was implemented. I was free to experiment with texture and emotion and have a live orchestra do whatever I could dream up. I had an idea that the more non-musical the score sounded, the scarier it would be. So I thought up all kinds of ways to get the orchestra play and NOT sound like an orchestra. A lot of it was just trying out ideas I had, some of which simply didn't work very well. But more often than not I would start conducting a cue and just get chills down my spine. Finally, I was able to hear all this music I'd been researching and theorizing about but never really knew exactly how it would sound when the orchestra performed it.

Even if you heard the orchestra playing by itself outside the game, especially the quieter stuff, it sounds more like some strange kind of ambient sound design than actual music. What's cool is it's actually a totally organic performance of a live orchestra, no effects or plug-ins added.

Sometimes Don would have very specific ideas of where something would go as soon as he heard it. After one particularly creepy, bubbling string effect, Don started telling about this really nasty creature that spills little worms out of its belly if you happen to shoot it there. That effect ending up being the basis for that entire cue in the game.

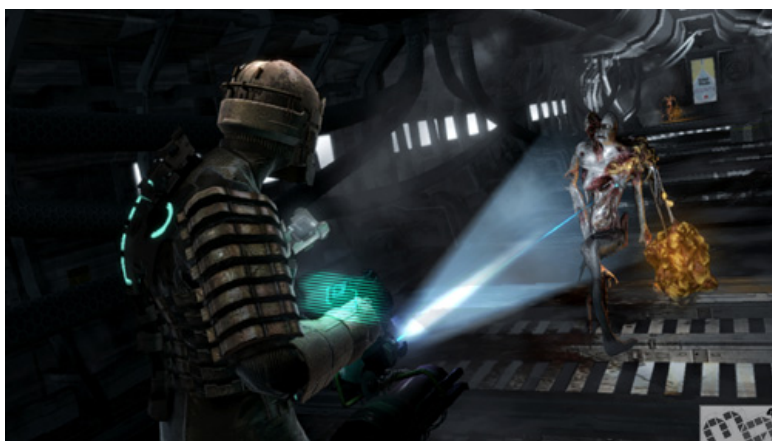


M4G: The *Dead Space* score is probably the most immersive soundtrack we've experienced since *BioShock*. Did you take a thematic approach at all or was it more about creating a deep atmosphere and overwhelming suspense?

Jason Graves: There were some themes that I used from time to time, but only at critical points in the game to allow for maximum effect. There's Nicole's theme, which is the most traditional, that plays when you first see the Ishimura and under various scenes that concern her character. There are also some themes for the bigger creatures, but they were pretty ugly and bombastic - not exactly something you would hum after you fought one of them.

I approached most of the score from a "what you don't understand can scare you more" mentality. I utilized meter changes and rhythmic ideas as my "themes" instead of memorable melodies. If a player recognizes a melody, or recognizes anything musical for that matter, from an earlier creature encounter, there's a sense of structure and predictability that can lull them into feeling more confident, even on a subliminal level. I wanted to strip any comfort or confidence away from them and leave nothing but fear of the unknown.

I think a large part of the immersive quality of the score is simply due to its lack of musicality, in the traditional sense, which of course for a title like *Dead Space* is a good thing. It's so raw and animalistic - it grabs you by the throat and never lets go, even when it's very quiet.



M4G: The *Dead Space* score feels much more like a top quality movie score than most game soundtracks. How was the approach different from other game scores?

Jason Graves: I approach each score the same way in the beginning: my ultimate goal is to create the best score I've ever written and stretch myself as much as possible by learning new things. The biggest difference in *Dead Space's* score was how I was able to isolate the orchestra at the scoring session and then build the pieces back up once I was in my studio.

I'm very proud of the final result, especially after hearing reviews compare it to film scores with ten times the music budget, not to mention teams of ten or fifteen people. Aside from my orchestrator and studio assistant it was just me sitting in my studio by myself, adding this sound to that sound, trying out different combinations and getting those four layer puzzles of interactive music working with the game.

I also think Don's "do whatever you think is best" attitude and hands-off approach to the final score gave me extra incentive to prove my theories and deliver something unexpected. Don has got really great ears and always gave me the perfect balance of freedom and feedback. The final score to *Dead Space* is due just as much to him as it is to me.



M4G: What was the most challenging aspect of scoring *Dead Space*?

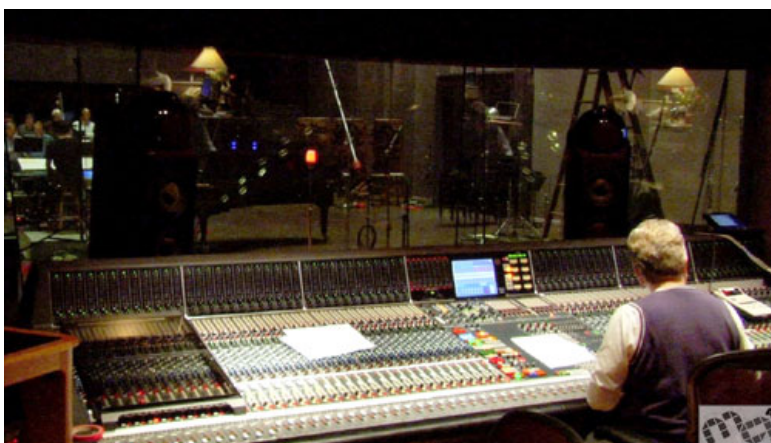
Jason Graves: Definitely keeping up the appropriate tone and tension for three hours of music. Needless to say, it's not easiest score to listen to. After a year of test mixes playing on the home theater, my family can attest to that themselves! When music production was in full swing I was composing ten to fifteen minutes a week, and that was a five day week, Monday to Friday, at least two or three evenings as well. I simply had to have the weekend off, if not for any other reason just to rest my ears. I became so accustomed to dissonance and tension it was hard for me to tell if I was composing anything that was really scary. Perspective is an extremely valuable tool and it could be hard to come by on *Dead Space*.



M4G: What are you most proud of about the *Dead Space* score?

Jason Graves: Ironically, I love the reviews that say things like, "There's relatively little music in the game..." My ultimate goal was to provide EMOTION to *Dead Space*. The main emotion I wanted to evoke was fear - I wanted to scare the crap out of people. Not just when something jumped out and you were attacked, either. I wanted to be able to build the tension up so high that by the time something does jump out you're already terrified. I don't think a "Wow, that's really cool music I hear" experience would provide that kind of suspense. Most of the music in *Dead Space* isn't recognized as music at all, and that makes it that much more scary.

I'm really proud of the final product. Not just the music, but the entire *Dead Space* audio experience. I set out to compose more texture and emotion than melody and memorable music. I wanted to try something different, something that would seamlessly integrate into the sound effects and heighten the gameplay more than a traditional score ever would be able to do.



M4G: Since the music is interactive in-game, did you have to re-arrange any tracks for the soundtrack album release?

Jason Graves: Wow, did I ever! The task of shaving down three hours of interactive music to a sixty minute "soundtrack experience" was daunting in itself. Each piece of music was delivered to EA as four separate files, one for each level. For the soundtrack I tried to stack and layer these levels the same way they might have been triggered in the game. I shortened a lot of the tracks, sometimes by half, simply so I could have more variety on the soundtrack. A lot of the in-game cinemas I scored made it onto the final CD as well.



M4G: What other projects do you have coming up that you can mention?

Jason Graves: In the film world, I just finished scoring a film that premiered in L.A. last month; that same director has his next project coming my way the first half of next year, a thriller. There's also a producer I've worked with before that has a documentary for me to score in a few months.

For games, there are some really big projects scheduled for a 2010 release that I'm unfortunately unable to talk about yet. But there are some games in 2009 that I can mention. One is *Alpha Protocol*, a cool spy-based RPG that's got some great opportunities for fun music. The second one is a game based on the *Alien* franchise, which I'm really excited to be involved with. The *Alien* developer really liked the *Dead Space* score, so it looks like I'm diving back into the depths of psychological fear and terror again. I've already apologized to my family in advance.

The *Dead Space Original Soundtrack* is released on November 11th.

Photos from *Dead Space* recording session at Skywalker Sound courtesy of Electronic Arts.

www.deadspacegame.com

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