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Vol. 34, NOVEMBER 2010 • U.S. \$3.95/\$4.95 Canada





GET INTO THE GAME

with

4 Video Game Composers

by Andy Kaufmann

Interactive entertainment's popularity has opened a brave new frontier for musicians, including those whose talents are in the orchestral realm. But what are the challenges inherent to this promising vista? How is scoring a video game different from scoring a movie? And how do aspiring game composers get a foothold in this competitive field? *Music Connection* talks with four individuals who are noted for putting their sonic signatures to some of gaming's best-loved and most lucrative series.

Jason Graves

“The only real constant in video games is change. There are always people switching companies. A lot of that is due to personal relationships.”

continue his association with the breakthrough property. “The only real constant in video games is change,” asserts Graves. “There are always people switching companies. A lot of that is due to personal relationships.” Those relationships, of course, came over the span of many projects; breaking in was a matter of pitching music to prospective employers, sometimes sending them pre-existing pieces that satisfied their goals, other times crafting custom recordings.

His first game project was based on the movie *King Arthur*. Graves talks about the open-ended instructions he often gets in relation to that experience. “I got specific things like Battle on the Ice or Forest Exploration. I just treated it like, okay, battle on the ice. I’m going to write a piece of music that would fit that if it were a movie.” Because of the nature of movie tie-in games, the music has to be completed before the film score, giving the composer complete freedom. “You can kind of do anything you want,” Graves exclaims, “which is really liberating.”

It’s the polar opposite of his experience ghost writing for film trailers and commercials where, instead of being creative, Graves was asked to make something sound like another popular composition. If he didn’t deliver something close enough to the original, he risked getting fired. If it was too close, he flirted with litigation. “I wasn’t writing music,” he reasons. “I was just turning notes on and off. It was really frustrating.” So when the *King Arthur* project came along and Graves was able to create whatever he wished, he knew where his future lay.

How do videogame composers get paid? Payment, Graves explains, is based upon per minute of completed score, except for cases in which there’s a package rate. Most of the games he works on average between one and two hours of completed music. Of course, the amount of music that can be included in a game is often constrained by the technical limitations of the system being written for. In the case of *Dead Space: Extraction* for the Wii, Graves was able to produce the first four-layer track for that console. Writing for the Nintendo DS handheld, however, restricted him with a downloadable batch of sounds from which he has to plunder.

Whatever the situation, Graves focuses on providing the soundtrack that will best fit a given game. And instead of delivering simple stereo tracks, he provides multi-track recordings that offer alternate mixes. “If I deliver a 60-minute score, I’ll actually give them three to four hours of possible combinations of that score,” he says. It’s all about not being repetitive.”

Graves advises aspiring game composers to remain open-minded. Even if the path that opens for you isn’t what you’d planned, welcome any opportunity when it arrives. “Be as multifaceted and well-rounded as you can,” he offers. “I did nothing but recordings for political radio spots for three years. I had the whole Republican Party of North Carolina queued outside my studio one day.” He even once composed music for corporate films. “If you love writing music, you need to write music all the time, whether it’s for a project or not. I’ve got hundreds of songs that I’m sure sound terrible now, but 10 years ago I was spending all my time writing stuff, studying, listening and doing everything I could to soak it all in. If you don’t have a this-or-nothing-else attitude, I think you’re going to be happy.”

MORE DETAILS at jasongraves.com

Jason Graves is best known for his work on EA’s sci-fi survival horror masterpiece, *Dead Space*, as well as its on-rails spin-off, *Dead Space: Extraction*. Yet this classical devotee cut his teeth on a wide array of titles, including the *Star Trek* series, comic book fantasy *City of Heroes*, spy thriller *Alpha Protocol* and children’s games like *Curious George* and *Dora The Explorer*. It’s the variety, he says, that keeps him happy. “I’d never done anything the least bit close to resembling *Dead Space*,” he reveals.

The thread linking all of his projects is orchestral music. “It’s got so many different styles,” he notes. For *Dead Space*, the composer studied ultra-modern scores and relished the opportunity to hang out with large orchestras and have creative freedom—zero mandates. “They just wanted me to record some freaky, abstract non-musical stuff,” says Graves. It was a unique project with a unique sound. Although the classically trained musicians balked at his command to play whatever note they chose, the results were both unusual and disturbing. The session also allowed him to experiment with outside-the-box techniques like beating violin strings or tapping chairs and stands. The effort earned Graves numerous awards, including the British Academy’s Best Original Score.

For the upcoming *Dead Space 2*, Graves is the only returning member of the original audio crew. “I’m like the last survivor of the first game,” he chuckles. The chance to work on a sequel is never a given, so he’s thankful for the opportunity to



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