

Lost in *Dead Space 2*, Part 2

The conclusion of our interview with Jason Graves on his latest video game score.

Interview by Kevin Thomas Costigan



In *Part 2*, Jason Graves talks about the influence of video games in his personal and family life, the state of video game music in the states versus abroad, and how film music is like fine wine. You can read *Part 1* [here](#).

KTC: I can tell by the enthusiasm in your voice that you have fun with this. I bet you're a big kid, aren't you?

JG: Yeah, pretty much. (*Laughs*)

KTC: Have you played the *Dead Space* games yourself?

JG: Yes. Actually the one exception to the rule was about four months before I started on *Dead Space 2*, I sat down and played through the entire game of *Dead Space 1*.

KTC: Did you beat it?

JG: I did, but I had already played it a million times and I kind of knew all the short cuts and I knew what was around the corner. I must admit I did have to have a friend of mine come over and help me do the little asteroid mini-game. I couldn't do that. But other than that, yes, I got through it. It just took me a while. But I was doing it as a musical exercise. I had the sound effects practically turned down and the music turned up, just to hear how it worked in the game. You know, [to] figure

out where I was gonna start for the second one. It helped a lot.

KTC: Before you started video game scoring, were you also into playing video games?

JG: Well, I played them. Yeah, definitely. I was never one of those really good gamers that could in two days play through an entire game. I just never had the dexterity of fingers, ironically since I'm a drummer. Actually, my talent has gotten worse because now I do most of my playing with the developers or on some sort of a prototype of the game and the first thing we always do is make ourselves invisible. We put it in God mode. The point isn't to play through the game and not get killed. The point is to play through the game and talk about what the music needs to do. I find as a result, now when I go sit down on my own, I'm even worse because I'm used to being invisible. (*Laughs*)

KTC: Do your children get to play the games you scored?

JG: Well, I've got two little girls so they don't play *Dead Space*. (*Laughs*) But they do play all the other stuff. We've got all the DS's and Wii's and PS3's, the computer games and everything else. They play a lot. Occasionally, I do get a chance to score kids games, and of course they love listening to me work on the music for that stuff. A lot of the LEGO games are popular around here. We'll play those together. *Dead Space*, not so much.



KTC: Are there any games your children have played where they say, "That's my dad's music!"?

JG: Oh yes. I've done a lot of [Nintendo] DS stuff for Moviesoft in Paris and it's so much fun because a lot of it is this MIDI-triggered sound set, very simple kind of sound, and I get to do just fun little I-IV-V [chord] progressions with the little melody. They love listening to it when I'm working on it. Fast forward four or five months and I've got the game for them to play and they are singing along and they want to play it for all their friends. Of course, if we ever go into a game store, because they've got *Dead Space* posters everywhere, my oldest one always has to tell them, "My daddy did the music for this game." And they look at me like, "What?!" and I'm like (*modest and shy tone*), "Yeah, yeah, I did." Then my

daughter says, “My daddy does music for all kinds of games!” (*Laughs*)

KTC: What are your thoughts on modern film scoring? It seems to be less musical than what we grew up with.

JG: I think there will always be a place in certain films for the wonderfully melodic and thematic, old fashioned orchestral score. I do appreciate some of the less busy, more straightforward orchestral kinds of things in films. I actually enjoy it less in games, because I feel there should be more thematic stuff in game music, but for films they work at certain times. Other times, I think they’re kind of boring. But the thing about film, it’s this kind of edible circle in a way, where it’s, “Well that worked! That kind of style of music worked. We have to do that again.” It’s repeating previous successes, but for all the wrong reasons. I mean, a film is not going to be successful if it’s got a very understated score and mood. A film’s going to be successful because people identify with the characters and the storyline. That’s all it comes down to. At least, that’s what I think. I like a film if I can identify with the characters and it has a great story, whether the music is fantastic or not.

KTC: I hope the future will bring new films that create the kind of timeless character and scenarios that people care about, to write music for. I don’t know, maybe I’m just jaded.

JG: I know. It’s hard to say, but I really do think it just comes down to emotion, period. You either feel it, or you don’t. Sure, you can have a great film with very little emotional music, but if it’s an emotional storyline and you really associate with the characters, it can be a very moving, emotional experience. But if you take that in film and hire a wonderful composer like John Williams or John Powell or even Hans Zimmer, when he’s not being made to do the “Hans Zimmer action thing,” it elevates it to a whole new level, because you put the music behind it and it goes from you caring about the characters to you carrying up in the theater, because you’re so in the moment. It’s the music that sucks you in. So it is a shame when you have some of these really great films with music that should have been more emotionally vested in the film and, by extension, in its audience.



But then you have stuff like *How to Train Your Dragon*. I'm glad that John Powell got [an Oscar] nomination. I saw it in the theater and the flying sequence was like, "Okay! I'm back to the first time I saw *E.T.*, back to the first time Harry rode the Hippogriff in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*." This is one of those perfectly blended music and visual things, and the whole score was this genius, Scottish drums and pipes and themes, and it was big and thematic and also dark. That's how you do a great score. And you can't do that for every film, I understand that. But it seems like more and more often, when you have a chance to have something like that, they're not doing it now. They consider it passé or cliché or whatever. They say, "Oh, it sounds like *Jurassic Park*." "Oh really? Well what's wrong with *Jurassic Park*?" (Laughs)

KTC: Did you listen to film soundtracks before you started composing them?

JG: Not until college. I remember I had *Jurassic Park*, but it was more because I liked the main themes that John Williams had. When it got into the action music, I would skip it because it was just too much for my brain to comprehend. It sounded to me like jazz or somebody who wasn't familiar with jazz. All these notes poking out that didn't really belong. Now I listen to it, I'm familiar with all the techniques, especially something like *Jurassic Park* where I've studied it, taken it apart, put it back together again. I think that's one of the reasons I liked *E.T.* It didn't have the really crazy, frenetic action music. It was just enough melody and harmony in there to kind of stay along for the ride musically.



KTC: So that's why people whose brains aren't acclimated to that kind of music express feeling anxious or uncomfortable. I had a girlfriend once that expressed feeling stressed after I played her the "Quidditch Match" cue from *Harry Potter 1*.

JG: I think so. I distinctly remember being in the car and the combat tracks closer to the end of the *Jurassic Park* CD came on and I tried to hang in there for about 30 or 45 seconds and I had to skip it. Not only because I didn't understand it, but it made me react on some primal level. It was just disturbing to listen to. Soundtracks are like an appreciation of good wine. The more you drink it and the more you educate yourself on it, you pick up on these different shades of grapes and vintages. It's the same thing with film music, but it could be any 20th century music. Most people just react on this base level of how it makes them feel. I can't do that anymore, because I'm analyzing it. It might make me feel one way or another, but half the reason it's making me feel that way is because my brain is picking it apart and figuring it out what it is that the composer is doing. I was doing a demo for the *King Kong* video game. It was a T-Rex action kind of thing and it had all these very *Jurassic Park*-y kinds of pointy harmonies and unease and things, and I played it for either my wife or my mom, I can't remember who. But when it was finished, and literally within about two seconds, they were physically squirming in their chair and saying, "Oh, no, I can't listen to stuff like this. That will make me crazy." (Laughs)

KTC: You have won multiple British Academy Awards for your work composing video games. Where do you fit in there having been bred in the States?

JG: From what I understand, the British Academy Awards are pretty much like the Academy Awards over here in America. They just have a completely separate ceremony for video games. So it's the same way a *Harry Potter* film would win an Academy Award over here, only it was made in Britain. They don't really have a bias towards games because they see it as so international. Of course they probably cheer a little louder when something from the U.K. wins, like *Little Big Planet*. But

for the most part, it's the Academy Awards, only just for video games. There's American developers and composers and everything else as well as people from other parts of the world. It really is neat, because they celebrate video games as their own art. I think it's something that's really missing here in America.

KTC: Who were your musical influences growing up? What hooked you into wanting to be a musician?

JG: Probably the first time I paid attention to it. I took piano lessons when I was five years old and took drum lessons and piano lessons in middle school, so I was always drawn to music, one way or another. In high school I thought about being a copyright attorney for music. I would be an attorney, but I'd still be able to do music. I was still operating under the fairly accurate idea that I needed to get a real job. I couldn't just go, you know, do music. So that went from attorney to more like a band director, because my band director in high school was so cool and encouraged me to do anything I wanted. I'd write pieces of music and have them performed at the concert. I was always doing music on the side.

CHRIS LENNERTZ

Interview by WILL SHIVERS

I met Chris Lennertz on the set of *Beachhouse*, a University of Southern California (USC) student feature film that he had hoped to score. In meeting him I knew he had the right amount of presence, confidence and what-have-you to make it as a film scorer.

At just 23, Lennertz recently graduated from SC's prestigious film scoring program. He studied under such minor individuals as Jerry Goldsmith, Elmer Bernstein and Bruce Broughton. His assured aura about him did not seem to stem from arrogance but from perhaps an understanding of his field that he attained from his schooling as well as from being an assistant for Basil Poledouris for the past two years.

Meeting him again for this interview, at a decent Venice restaurant, I am reminded that if anything, this guy has what he needs to succeed in this world of egos: a grip.

Will Shivers: We should make this one side, 45 minutes, so I don't have to cut out a lot of stuff.

Chris Lennertz: Okay.

WS: I'm sure Lukas won't want it to be too long. We could do like a quarter of a page little blurb, one question: "So what do you think of the future of film music... great thanks a lot"... Anyway, was it intimidating coming out into the real

world, out of USC?

CL: Yes. The strange thing was, coming from a school like SC with the professors there, you know, Elmer and Bruce and Chris Young, all year you've been talking about \$250,000 a month music budgets and London Symphony and things like that. And then you come into the real world and somebody smacks you with a movie with a \$500,000 complete budget and the biggest star on it is, you know, Lenz Anderson or somebody [I laugh], and it's beach bimbos in France. It's a culture shock more than anything else. You have to work your way up there.

WS: We often talk about the hacks versus those who have been classically trained, like yourself...

CL: My biggest thing has always been melodies. If someone has a real talent to write good melodies, I can't fault them for that. If they've got the brains to hire good orchestrators and people to get them out of a jam, when given the opportunity to make that kind of money and be in that profile of a career, you can't blame 'em. It's just frustrating for people who are in my position who spend a number of years in school studying orchestration, composition, both classical and film, being out there in front of a symphony orchestra for two or three years, doing recording sessions, scoring student films, really feeling like you've worked your way out with every sense of

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...JUST BECAUSE YOU DON'T KNOW WHO CHRIS LENNERTZ IS. HE'S A USC GRAD TRYING TO BECOME A FILM COMPOSER—AND DOING A GOOD JOB OF IT—AND HAS VALUABLE INSIGHTS ON WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE IN THAT POSITION.

INTERESTING! NOT BORING!

it. You know the range of your own instruments, you know the unusual sound that the oboe makes at such and such a pitch. And then somebody coming from the rock world or knowing a certain producer or director, who is basically someone who fumbles around with a synthesizer—and with today's technology, you can make a synthesizer sound pretty damn good fumbling around with it... It's just frustrating for those people who put in the real time to get to that, you have to work twice as hard to get the chance to do something impressive.

WS: Did SC prepare you for the synth-type work you now have to do?

CL: I think it does. I don't think that the premise of film composing changes between electronics and orchestra or live instruments. It's the same, it's just a different palette. Whether an artist is using oils or watercolors, he still needs to be a good artist to make a good score. I've heard scores that are almost completely electronic that

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So I went to college as a music major, planning to be a band director, then I decided I wanted to be a college professor instead. I would stick it out, stay in school and get a doctorate. That way I could teach composition, but I could also be a composer and resident somewhere, figured it was the best of both worlds. But this one thing, watching *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* in the theater, which of course made me just bawl like a baby at the ending, but what really stuck with me was the first 10 minutes and last 10 minutes of the movie. There's no dialogue. It's all action driven, and it's all scored perfectly to picture. And it always kind of hung out in the back of my head and then, ironically enough, my junior year in college I was reading this little stapled five-page, photocopied pamphlet called *Film Score Monthly*, published by this guy Lukas Kendall and they were doing an article on Christopher Lennertz. This was in '94, I think. The title of the article was something like "Wait, Wait! Don't Skip This Article Because You've Never Heard of Christopher Lennertz. He just graduated from The University of Southern

California's Prestigious Film Program. You've got a lot to learn if you read the article. It's really interesting." I read the article and it was like a light bulb went off in my head. "I don't want to be a professor. I want to go to The University of Southern California to their Film and Television Program." This is before the internet was around, so it wasn't like you could just surf the internet and see how many schools had film music programs. It was all word of mouth or you'd buy one of those \$80 three-inch-thick books with all the newest colleges listed with all their programs and things. So, that's kind of what kicked it off. I kid Chris about that whenever I talk to him that I blame him for my entire career. *(Laughs)*

KTC: Do you have a dream project that you haven't done yet?

JG: My ultimate goal for any project, and it only happens one in every 10 times, is to record with a live orchestra. My real ultimate goal would be London Symphony Orchestra, Abbey Road, a couple hours of music, spend three days there recording stuff. Honestly, I'm not even thinking of the style of music or anything like that. It's just orchestra. That's just what I love. If I have an orchestra, I'm happy.

KTC: How often do you work in London?

JG: As often as I can. I love going to London. I just came from the worldwide premiere of *Dead Space 2* in London. If I can get the budget for it that's the first place I want to go record stuff. They're just phenomenal and they don't have all the sticky union stuff with video games that seems to be popping up so much lately in Los Angeles.



Bloody Good: Jason Graves at rehearsal for the London premiere of *Dead Space 2*, in the Crypt at St. James Clerkenwell.

KTC: What are the differences between unions in the U.K. compared to those in the states?

JG: There was this agreement that popped up about six years ago with Local 47 in Los Angeles—a video game agreement that came to be and a lot of people adopted that allowed us to record in L.A. without all the usual negotiation, without a possible soundtrack release or anything like that, because video game publishers just don't have the same attitude that filmmakers do. Hopefully one day that will change. But this agreement allowed us to work in L.A. and San Francisco at a cheaper rate as far as re-use fees. The AFM [American Federation of Musicians union] has a new president and new people on the board of directors in L.A. They are restructuring certain principle clauses that don't allow us to record in L.A. anymore. It's not something they did intentionally to ostracize the video game market. They just assumed that game publishers would adopt these very minor changes. In the game publishers' eyes and especially in the legal department's eyes, they are not minor changes, even though they really are. Then they just said, "Where else can you go record?" So, that's been the last six months.

Now, if I have a choice to record anywhere in the world, I'm gonna go to London no matter what the unions say. I just love the town. I love the players. I love Abbey Road and Air Studios. If I can't go to London, Los Angeles is my second choice. I love L.A. as well. I've got tons of friends out there. The players are obviously fantastic and there are still some great stages in L.A. available for recording. Then for certain jobs I'll go to Skywalker [Ranch] just because there are so many game developers in San Francisco. It's kind of nice for them to drive an hour north and go to the session as opposed to having to fly.

KTC: Does George Lucas have any influence in the gaming industry to have scores recorded at the Skywalker Ranch?

JG: No, not that I know of. I've been in on some composition and recording sessions for some of the *Star Wars* stuff and obviously they do that there because it's his place. It's kind of like he's billing himself for it in a way. No, it's just a great big stage and the musicians are wonderful because they are pulling from the San Francisco Opera and the San Francisco Symphony. They've got a fairly good talent pool and they're equipment is top notch, but the room itself is, as far as I know, one of the really tunable rooms that you can get. They have these automated panels that open and close and if you have them all closed, it's this giant sounding room. Well, because it is a giant room, but you can close everything. It's kind of creepy, because you're in this huge room and there's practically no reverb at all. That's how I recorded the string quartet stuff for *Dead Space 2*. I kept having them close more and more panels and it literally puts a giant carpet over the entire room. It's still this great sound but without all the reverb.

KTC: What does a full day's recording session look like? Does that include rehearsal time?

JG: There's no rehearsal. We just go in and record. The only thing we will re-record is maybe the first cue, only because, not from a performance standpoint,

just people's headphones need to get adjusted, the mic levels need to get adjusted. Maybe there was some click bleed in the violas or something like that.

KTC: What are your thoughts on conducting?

JG: I wish I could do more of it. *(Laughs)* That's the most fun I have, especially with a game like this where we're doing all these crazy effects and things. I mean, getting to finally stand up there and you'll be surprised to hear this, because I'm kind of an outgoing guy. *(Pauses)* That was a joke.... Getting up in front of the orchestra, I have no problem talking in front of people, so basically I'm just kind of holding this baton and getting them to play whatever I want to. So that's like the epitome of my career. That's my goal with every game when I've got a budget for live musicians is to get to the stage and get to conduct the musicians. There is nothing else like it really, especially when you have the whole orchestra there. You know, 60 or 80 folks all working together to play this piece of music. It's just great.

KTC: What projects do you have lined up next?

JG: Hmm. Games are a lot worse than film and television, as far as their non-disclosure agreements go, so there's six different games that I'm juggling. Some of them have deadlines that are soon. Some have deadlines that are a couple of months from now and all of them are in production over the next six or eight months. But what I love about games is they're not all horror titles. You would think after *Dead Space* and now with *Dead Space 2*, people would be knocking on my door looking for *Dead Space* and no one's actually asked for that. Now, there is one horror title I did that's coming out this summer, I think, and obviously they hired me because they liked *Dead Space*. But they didn't want it to sound like *Dead Space*, they wanted it to sound original. And I never really thought about it, but that's one of the great things about games is the more original I can be, the happier they are with the music. They don't necessarily want it to sound just like *Friday the 13th* or whatever. We're usually not even talking about specific sounds. Lately, it's just been about, "Whatever you think works, Jason." Then I do some stuff and we figure out if it works or not. So, six different games! One of them is a fantasy game, which is a lot of fun. Another is more of a gritty, realistic action game. There's one kind of psychological thriller in there. A sci-fi, cool, kind of third-person shooter, and some others along that same vein.



But the other nice thing is, I'm not just doing games. I've got a couple of films as well, very low-key, independent films. One of them is a documentary. Another one is kind of a drama. The documentary is on a particular artist, and is scored with mostly blues music. It's just great to be able to do different things and not be pigeon-holed as this guy that only does super-scary music. *Dead Space* was the first horror thing I'd ever done. I just did what I always did—I researched it, I deconstructed it and figured out what I thought would be a cool way of making scary stuff and went off and did it.

KTC: Might you turn the music from *Dead Space* into a concert piece?

JG: I don't think I've done a live performance like that. It's all been recording sessions. I've done some concert pieces that were performed live but never a re-performance of something I originally recorded. So in that sense it was a new frontier for me. Although I'm getting requests, especially since my publicist is making a big deal about this quartet thing. I think people are curious about maybe performing it elsewhere, which would thrill me to death since it's a nice balance of pretty classical stuff, but also it gets a little dark and it has some crazy effects in there. It could make for a good concert piece. I'm doing an arrangement for string ensemble of the same piece as opposed to it just a quartet, to make it a little more accessible for the orchestra's themselves, not for the audience, so you could have the whole string ensemble play. We'll see. It's driven by requests, so if people ask me about it, I'm totally up for it.

KTC: Imagine if it was played by the New York Philharmonic...

JG: Yeah, that would be cool!

—FSMO