

Lost in *Dead Space 2*, Part 1

Jason Graves scores the next chapter in Isaac Clarke's dark, emotional journey.

Interview by Kevin Thomas Costigan



Following his success with *Dead Space*—dubbed the “world’s scariest game” by *PlayStation World Magazine*—multiple BAFTA-winning composer Jason Graves has returned to sci-fi/horror territory scoring his latest video game project, *Dead Space 2*. The new game picks up three years after the previous game installment left off, as game players continue the story of Isaac Clarke, who now resides locked away in a psych ward, enduring the painful effects of post-traumatic stress disorder. As Isaac, the player must once again battle vicious monsters in the claustrophobic confines of space as well as a crippled mental state. *Dead Space 2* takes the player on a mind trip where the lines between reality and insanity are in constant question. This unique game, with its cutting edge graphics technology and quality sound design, plays out like some of the silver screen’s most powerful psychological thrillers.

Kevin Thomas Costigan: *Dead Space 2* picks up directly where the first game left off with the primary character, Isaac, locked up in a psych ward. What direction did you take in playing out the trauma and insanity of the character musically?

Jason Graves: Correct me if I’m wrong, but I’m pretty sure there’s a three-year space between *Dead Space 1* and *Dead Space 2*. What this does is serve to the player how much time has gone by. Isaac is in a mental institution. He’s wearing a straight jacket and there are videos of him talking to a therapist and they’re doing all this brain probing and psychotropic drug treatment on him. It all comes off the way the first one ended. It’s the next logical step. Essentially in the first game, the whole reason Isaac volunteered as an engineer to go help repair this mining vessel was because his girlfriend was on it. I don’t think I’m giving away too much when I say she’s dead, because it’s what you find out at the end of the first game. What I love is Electronic Arts (EA) took this and ran with all the psychological impact that would have on somebody.

So when the second [game] starts, he’s literally haunted by the ghost of his dead girlfriend. He’s having these conversations with her and you don’t really know if she’s good or bad. Sometimes she’s helping him, other times she’s trying to hurt him. He has these bouts of dementia where you can tell what he’s seeing isn’t real, but it’s definitely a different take on a character arc for a video game for sure. It really seems like something that would be in a film. What’s real? What isn’t? Are they trying to help me? Are they trying to hurt me? What I loved about the idea of his relationship with his dead girlfriend is they had all these cinematics that were scripted before they did all the motion captures and everything. They had these cinematics with a conversation between him and Nicole. Sometimes it would last

20 seconds, other times it would last a minute and a half. There's no action. It's not like he's talking to a voiceover or running down the hall trying to get rid of something. They're just standing there or sitting there and talking.

You know there's an arc to the story as these scenes pop up in the game. So I had already determined that I wanted to do something, if EA would let me, with a string quartet for *Dead Space 2*. I love the idea of a small intimate ensemble contrasted with the giant, thrashing orchestra stuff and this seemed like the next logical step. They have all these intimate, vulnerable moments in the game. So I thought, "Well let's use the string quartet to do that too."

KTC: I noticed "Nicole's Theme" from the previous *Dead Space* score can be heard in the new score's opening piece titled, "Welcome to the Sprawl." Can you talk a bit about the themes for the new game?

JG: It's funny, that was the only theme I was able to get by EA for the first *Dead Space*. I would try to do something, even just nasty 12-tone atonal themes and if it was anything that was slightly recognizable after two attempts I gave up, because they said, "No! No themes! NO THEMES!" But they did let me do one to establish the opening cinematic of the first *Dead Space*. Isaac is on the ship, and is going towards the Ishimura and "Nicole's Theme" is playing the entire time. For me, it's all about Isaac and his mental state. That's what he was thinking about in the first game—"There's the ship. There she is. I gotta go rescue her." It was sad and dark, but also kind of hopeful and had a little sci-fi harmony in it.

This time around, I wanted to take it and play it through the [string quartet](#) that now has this even more intimate, sad, kind of quiet, emotional feel. He knows she's dead now, so the opening scene of the whole game is playing her theme, again in the same key. Almost the same instrumentation, just with the string quartet, instead of with the full orchestra and it's underneath them talking. That way, whenever she's speaking, I'm able to use her theme. I usually use it in the same key too, because it's recalling Isaac's memory of her. It's all about Isaac. But then when you kind of snap out of it and it goes back to real life, you get this [dementia kind of motif](#) that I have slowly bending up and down on a single note and it's in the quartet. Still, it's very internal. Now, other times in the game it's huge, because it's affecting other things around him as well as himself and the whole orchestra's doing it. Even that little motif is really more of an effect. I pulled that from the first *Dead Space*, because I wanted to use that kind of psychological duress for the game. It ended up sounding throughout the game a lot, so you hear this seasick kind of pitch-bending thing and that became one of maybe three sounds that when people hear it they go, "Oh, that's *Dead Space*!" (*Laughs*)

KTC: So EA didn't want themes in *Dead Space 1*? You had to fight to get "Nicole's Theme" in there. Did they say why?

JG: Because it was too identifiable, and they said it didn't keep with the atmosphere. And I agree with them, musically speaking, though it's just like bludgeoning yourself with a sledgehammer in the head because it's all this horrific music and no themes whatsoever. But in the game it ended up working really, really well. This time around, I added a couple of themes, especially in some of the combat stuff and the quieter scenes, but they're only four notes and not exactly the kind of theme you would walk away humming. It's just more like four quarter notes. They state themselves here and there, a lot of times on top of each other, playing different things, but it was simple enough. It seemed like a good way to straddle the fence. It was more like a motif than a melody. Just four notes and you can state it, get it out of the way. It gives you a little something more to hang your hat on here, coming back again and again.



KTC: So you had more creative freedom on *Dead Space 2*?

JG: Oh gosh, yes. I didn't have a lot of corrections on the first one *per se*, but there was very specific direction for things, like "This should be a creepy sounding cue" ... "This should be a tense sounding cue" ... "This should be a complete panic inducing cue." We had very strict rigid guidelines on instrumentation. "No trumpets. We can have woodwinds, but no clarinets or oboes." You know, it's personal taste with the people you work with and the way people associate certain instruments with certain kinds of music. This time around, EA kind of just shrugged their shoulders and said, "Yeah, um, just do what you did last time." (Laughs) So I immediately took that and said, "Okay, I want to use a string quartet, what do you think?" "Uh, sure, let's hear how it sounds." "Okay great! So I'm gonna put a few themes in there as well. Just really simple things." They said, "Well... themes." I said, "No, no, no. It's like four simple notes, like for Isaac it's gonna be D-E-A-D." And they loved that. They loved the idea of having this musical wing.

KTC: Can you elaborate more on D-E-A-D?

JC: Well technically speaking it's D-flat, E, A-flat, D-natural. That's pretty much "[Isaac's Theme](#)." I use it on a couple of different levels. Isaac's whole character has been reformed by the death of his girlfriend, because that's the only reason why he went on the ship in the first place. Even in the opening cinematic, the first time he thinks about her, when's he's talking to the psychiatrist, you hear [*hums the notes*] "D E A D" as soon as she pops up. It's his theme in the cello, but it states his emotional truth that she's dead. The music plays on that so it ends up getting distorted and you hear the [Unitology bells](#) play "D E A D" as well as it builds and builds. You know, that's just the way composers work, I guess, even though 99% of the people won't pick up on it. It's a way of building my blocks, to have my little tower. (Laughs)

KTC: What other new themes did you create for the game?

JG: There's two themes in *Dead Space 2*. One of them is "Isaac's D E A D theme" and the other is "[The Marker Theme](#)" which essentially is this giant statue that is the source of this alien infection that creates all the monsters in the game. "The Marker Theme" is rhythmically identical to "Isaac's Theme." It's just four quarter notes, but it just steps down in half steps, wherever it is, almost obliterating whatever tonal center there was if there was one, because this is *Dead Space*. The four-note descending chromatic line is the "Bad Guy Theme." Once you hear it once, you pick up on it everywhere. One of those two themes is playing through the entire score, especially in the ambient stuff.

A lot of times there will be a very slowly descending chromatic line, like every whole note, and then every three or four bars it's alternating between "D E A D" and it's this *basso continuo* kind of thing. For example, the track titled "[Much Ado About Necromorphs](#)" has got the half step down kind of as a military fanfare and then Isaac's is somewhere in there too. The [second half](#) of that track, when it goes to the ambient part, is both of the themes on top of each other. If you listen to it

slowly, you can hear it, the descending chromatic line on the top and then “Isaac’s Theme” in the middle.

KTC: So musically the themes are enmeshed together?

JG: Exactly. And then a lot of times, I’ll also play all of those four chromatic notes at the same time, so you get this [*humming it all together*] constructed cluster. Practically every string quartet piece has these little 30-second things put together, just repeating the same four notes over and over. Now, my point was, where I really had a lot of fun is where they had me write the “[End Game](#)” music for the mall in the school. I wrote this 60- or 90-second piece that would sound as if you were writing “It’s a Small World,” except the entire time it’s playing “D E A D.” It’s in a major key. It’s very pleasant to listen to, but the “D E A D” notes continue going on throughout the entire thing, both in this happy bass note or in bells at the beginning of each measure. It’s just stacked all over the place. And once you know that this happy song was built from notes that spelled “dead,” it just kind of makes you smile. (*Laughs*)

Now, depending on what theme is called for, I would re-harmonize it. Sometimes, if it was in the game as D-flat, E-natural, A-flat, D-natural, essentially it’s a minor triad with a flat nine. It’s like a jazz chord.

KTC: Did you intentionally go into *Dead Space 2* wanting to use D-E-A-D or did that just evolve naturally?

JG: Yeah, I wanted it to be “D E A D.” I just had to figure it out harmonically. I’ve got a half-step variation on any of those, that was what I ended up coming up with. But in the same sense it could be C-sharp instead of D-flat, which is the exact same note. You know, C-sharp, E, A-natural, D, and then you are in an A-major triad, which is how I did most of the happy music. So it’s the same notes. They’re off just by one half-step. It spells the same thing, but it’s in a major key and then a minor key. That’s how I did the mall music as well. I did this great harmonic permutation. It’s basically like “The Girl From Ipanema.” The chord structure in “The Girl From Ipanema” has got this half step above your root position before it settles back down. And it just so happens that’s how I had my [four-note theme](#). So I was able to put the theme right in there over the chord progression, put it in the [bossa nova](#) and it ended up working perfectly.

KTC: When you’re composing music that’s very intense and very emotional, what kind of a dark place do you have to go to for inspiration? Is there a part of you that says, “I have to go a little insane here to get the right music?”

JG: (*Laughs*) You know, that’s a good question, because I know other guys and I’ve worked with them on things, when they’re doing something like *Dead Space*, they have to do it at night. They say, “I can’t write that music during the day.” Or [they have to] create specific emotional mindsets that they have to put themselves in. I’ve just never been like that. I think it maybe comes back to my time in L.A. I was working on all these TV shows, the music had to get done and it had to get done quickly. It had to be finished by the end of the day and I just sat down and did it. I kind of figured out how it was going to sound in my head, put it into the computer and it was done. I’ve always had this deconstructive, analytical approach, especially to orchestral stuff. So it is actually, I don’t know, kind of second nature by now. I also have a background in 20th century composition. So, other than researching as many unusual orchestral techniques as I could get, it was almost like I was standing back from it and saying, “Well, let’s put these things together here,” and then, “Put this in here,” and you kind of grow a thick skin to a lot of that stuff.

And I would question myself and wonder if it was scary enough. Like the opening cinematic on that first track, “Welcome to the Sprawl,” where it builds and builds and builds, and you then you have the big snap to staccatos and everything dies off. I thought, “It’s not enough. It needs to be more!” But then I heard it three months

later and thought, “Wow! That really transformed. That’s really dynamic and gets kind of spooky.” But it’s hard to have that kind of perspective when you’re working on it. I guess in that sense, yeah, there is a little insanity that creeps in, because you grow so used to your musical surroundings.



KTC: Do you find yourself affected by the music you’ve created after you’ve finished your work for the day? Does it affect you in any way?

JG: *(Pauses to reflect)* No. *(Laughs)*

KTC: That’s good! *(Laughs)*

JG: I don’t want it to come across like I’m this musical engineer that’s just kind of sitting down and putting notes into a computer. For me, I’m just like you, it is 100% emotion. If it doesn’t move me when I’m working on it, I keep working on it and changing it and tweaking it and molding until it does something, you know, until it really speaks to me. From 9 to 5, I am completely in the zone, either getting excited about it or not getting excited about it. But once I’m finished, and I think this comes in part with having a family, having kids, you know, wanting to have a life, having that perspective of not doing stuff at night, when I come back the next morning, I’m fresh. I’m so much more productive that way. I just shut everything down. It maybe takes me an hour to kind of come into the real world and be able to carry on a conversation and stuff, because it does stick with me for 30 to 45 minutes or something. I’m still working in my head. I can’t help it.

KTC: You’re still in the zone.

JG: Yeah. But then by the time we hit dinner, I’ve turned it off. I can chill out and then jump right back into it the next morning.

KTC: How do you prep yourself to get into a creative zone? How do ideas come to you? Do you look for inspiration?

JG: That’s quite the loaded question, isn’t it? *(Laughs)* Let me think. *(Pauses)* Now I can speak specifically to *Dead Space 2* because I have vivid memories of doing that. I literally start from scratch for every cue. Maybe I’ve got my little four-note themes worked out that I know I want to use somehow, but it it’s a matter of starting with rhythm, especially with *Dead Space*, because the rhythm’s so off the wall and kind of unpredictable. There’s usually not any straightforward 4/4. Or if there is, the accents are kind of bouncing all over the place. So this is where it comes from being a drummer and a percussionist.

If I’m doing a combat cue like the cue [“Much Ado About Necromorphs.”](#) I pick a rhythm that I think works and kind of bounces around, and I tap on it, figure out what I want, put the meters into the computer and then just start going. A lot of times the issue isn’t trying to come up with an idea, but trying to pick an idea and sticking with it. It’s kind of like what a chef thinks about creating a menu. He’s made a soufflé 10,000 times before. So he wants to do something a little bit different and it’s not a matter of what do I do that’s different. It’s like which thing do I pick to put into this that’s going to give it a different slant and reflect who I

am as a chef. So it's like chiseling away at a sculpture and I've got this big block and it's already in there. You've just got to get all the right pieces chiseled away from it. The more I orchestrate stuff, the more I can hear all the crazy things in my head. It's just a matter of getting them out and into the computer before I forget what they sound like. *(Laughs)*

KTC: If you could pick three pieces that stand out most for you, which ones would they be and why?

JG: The first track "Welcome to the Sprawl" ended up working great because that whole thing was scored to a cinematic except for the last 60, maybe 90 seconds, which are actual game play. I was really happy with how it turned out because I was able to musically state every theme and texture and *Dead Space 2* device that I was trying to implement into the entire score into this first three minutes of the very opening of the game. You've got the string quartet immediately at the beginning. You've got the dementia kind of seasick sound. You've got "Isaac's D E A D theme" and you even have the Unitology in the struck glass bells and religious feel. It all comes together. It's like a good prologue to an opera. It kind of says, "This is what we're gonna do for the entire ride, so get ready."

I also love the first couple of the action pieces, like "Much Ado About Necromorphs" and "Nice R. I. G. If You Can Get It," just because they were so much fun to work on.

The other piece I really love is the last piece on the CD, titled "Lacrimosa," and I guess that's appropriate because they're bookended. "Lacrimosa" is definitely a creative highlight for me. Actually, what's on the disc is only the first and third movements. The second movement, which has all the crazy effects and things was opted out for the collector's edition only. But what I love about that piece is it's got the quartet and it has all the major themes in it. I composed that completely outside of the game. The whole thing is ten- and-a-half-minutes long. It was born out of the idea that we were going to record this quartet stuff and we were going to have an hour left. You have to have a minimum of three hours to book the musicians. So I wrote this piece to fill up the last hour. And it was great. It was like writing a concert piece. I did it in three movements and I stated my themes and did variations. It follows the storyline of the entire game, essentially. The version on [my website](#) is actually the complete version of the string quartet.



When I was in London for the premiere of *Dead Space 2*, I conducted the world premiere of that quartet piece played live with principle members from the London Philharmonia and they played about half of it, about seven minutes long. They did it live without any stops. They sight-read once and then we had the performance and they nailed it!

KTC: How do these track titles come to you?

JG: Some of them just come naturally. It just pops into my head because it's a silly name. Like "Start Spreading the Limbs" was from the creative director on *Dead Space 2*. I had pitched a bunch of different titles and that was the one they came back with and said, "That was original." I said, "That's great, we gotta use that." I'm a huge jazz fan, so it's easy for me. "Come Rain or Come Shine"...Come Rain or Come Convergence"...there's a lot of jazz stuff in there. Other ones are just fun.

A lot of times I just think about some of my favorite songs or movies. I love it when it works on two levels. Like the third track, "Nice R. I. G. If You Can Get It," that's an acronym for Isaac's suit. You go through the game for the first 30 or 40 minutes of the game, you're not in your suit or you're in your old suit and you get upgraded to the new rig. That's the first piece of combat music once you've gotten your new rig. You can opt out too and just stay in the old one. So in a way it's funny, because it's a play on [Gershwin's] "Nice Work If You Can Get It," but it's also appropriate, because it *is* a nice rig...if you can get it, because there are some points throughout the game where you don't earn the new suit.

Now, there are three anagrams in those track titles that respell to other words or phrases that actually have a lot of meaning in the *Dead Space* universe. Did you pick up on any of those?

KTC: I didn't. I must go back and look again. Want to give me some hints?

JG: I'll give you the one I've told other people about, because I don't think anyone would ever get it. There's many times in the game, especially in the script, it would be marked as an aside. Examples of this are conversations that characters would have outside of the action and intense horror and everything. I ended up writing using Isaac's "D E A D." I reharmonized it in these beautiful, but sad chords and ended up putting in another character's theme on top of it. It's almost like a cannon. I was just thinking of how a cannon starts with the cello line. I wanted to do something kind of like that, but be darker in the *Dead Space* world. So it's kind of this musical cannon and then they had all these asides, so I thought, "Well, I'll figure something out." And that's why the track's called "[Canonical Aside.](#)" It's a little awkward sounding, but if you respell it, it actually spells Isaac and Nicole.

KTC: Oh, wow! I see it. That's awesome!

JG: I thought it was pretty awesome too when I figured it out. I thought, "I gotta put that on the soundtrack! That sounds cool!"

—FSMO

(Next month, Graves discusses the differences between scoring video games in the U.K. and the U.S., his musical influences.)