

The Key of Success

Dreams come true in a variety of genres for '90s Hayes School of Music graduates

Computer game sound tracks

By David Menconi

Jason Graves '96 found his calling early, when he saw "E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial" as a kid. But the movie had less impact than the music.

"That was the first movie where I thought the music was really something, and it's stuck with me," Graves says. "When I became a composition major in college, I went back to 'E.T.' and also got into 'Hook' – another phenomenal John Williams score, even if it's not much of a movie. Then I read about USC's film-scoring program and thought, 'Maybe I want to do that.'"

Graves does do that, but primarily for computer games. Graves has scored more than 80 games ranging from "Star Trek" to "Arthur and the Invisibles." And he reached a peak with his score to 2008's "Dead Space," which won nine different awards last year, including two from the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (the U.K. version of the Oscars). It's been so successful, in fact, that Graves is hearing from lots of people who want music just like it.

"It's ironic because 'Dead Space' was more textural than melodic, and I like the big thematic, cinematic sweeping themes a lot more," he says. "But I'm still happy being pigeonholed as 'the dark orchestral guy' because I'm glad to be working. And I can do other stuff, too. I just did a super-hero game that was very thematic and heroic, and a World War II submarine game that's very operatic and Wagnerian. That's the beauty of games, so many different styles."

After graduating from Appalachian, Graves earned a graduate certificate from the University of Southern California and went to work for a television soundtrack composer in Los Angeles. That kept him busy with the likes of "World's Scariest Police Chases" and Burger King spots, but the work was unsatisfying. The instructions he received often amounted to, "We want but can't afford this, so copy it."

By then, North Carolina had emerged as a center for television and independent film production. Thinking he could break into movies himself, Graves moved to Raleigh in 1998 and took every music job he could. He played drums in a rock band and cut music for training videos, TV shows and commercials.



Jason Graves '96

Photo provided by Dan Goldwasser

Computer games entered the picture in 2002, when Graves was hired to do orchestral music for a game version of "The Hobbit." He quickly earned a reputation as a crackerjack composer of symphonic music for games. He scores eight to 12 games a year, plus the occasional piece of TV incidental music ("American Idol" is a regular customer).

By now, Graves gets large-enough budgets to work with live symphonies. Overseeing live orchestral recording sessions is one of his favorite parts of the job.

"If I can keep doing live orchestral stuff a couple of times a year, I'll be totally happy," he says. "I'm at my happiest when I've written something cool that didn't exist at the start of the day. I always feel like, 'Today's the day I'm gonna write my best piece ever.' Until tomorrow."

