# CS 42 Call of Duty 01272021.mp3

[00:00:00] We are not going to let them move this nuke inside the states. It's time to take that process once and for all.

[00:00:08] A soldier has an important mission, but his success depends on understanding his past and looking back will take his loyalties to their limits. Sounds like the plot of an opera, right? But it's actually the plot of the hottest video game on the market. I'm Colleen Phelps and this is classically speaking.

[00:00:31] Dean, wrap up any unfinished business. Once we strike, there's no turning back.

[00:00:37] Call of duty black ops. Cold War hit the market at the end of last year with a soundtrack recorded right here in Nashville. I wanted to hear all about it from composer Jack Wall. But first, I needed a little insight on the game experience.

[00:00:51] So I called the biggest fan I know, my 10 year old Godson Ridge.

[00:00:57] So Bell, the character, you don't really know his back story, but he's a guy the CIA rescued because he was the teammate of a Russian who was taking hostages.

[00:01:09] There was ever an operation suited to your skill set? It's this one. I handle the talking. You get us the names.

[00:01:15] Ridge explained the whole plot of the game to me. It's a first person shooter game and Bell is the character you play.

[00:01:21] He was a soldier in the Vietnam War and you get to play through his memories like that. That's how he got the job.

[00:01:33] Tough story, but when I asked Ridge what makes it exciting? Listen to what he brought up.

[00:01:38] The music really intensifies the game and without the music, it would be pretty boring.

[00:01:50] That's no surprise because composer Jack Walls priority is that you enjoy the story.

[00:01:56] It's my job to be a storyteller as a musician and composer.

[00:02:07] Jack Wall made a transition from rock band life to production and then soundtrack work. In the 1990s. He had been working with artists like Patti Smith and John Cale. While scores have driven the intensity for players of big video game franchises like Mass Effect, Jade Empire and yes, several iterations of Call of Duty for decades now.

[00:02:28] I love watching stories, you know, whether it's film, TV or playing a game that has a good story. So my favorite games have great stories. They're also fun to play, but the story is an important part for me.

[00:02:40] A lot of video game scores are created electronically with sampling, but was first experience with soundtracks, was acoustic. He was watching John Cale composed Live in real time. Now while goes for big orchestral sound, epic, adventurous, cinematic. His breakthrough was this one that he wrote for Myst III, which was a sequel of the franchise that had made him fall in love with video games.

[00:03:10] And it was like, wow, this music is really doing something to this experience and I really enjoyed it and that's what got me interested in games. And then I suddenly was was playing Myst and it was like, oh, this is going somewhere. I want to be part of this.

[00:03:32] But call of duty is different, this isn't a castle or a forest. This is war. And for black ops, Cold War, it's his job to make you feel like you've traveled back to the tension-filled 1980s.

[00:03:42] When I heard it was Cold War, I was really excited because, I want to date myself too much. But I grew up in the early 80s. So, you know, I was, I was graduating high school in 1981.

[00:03:52] So Reagan, Brezhnev,

[00:03:54] Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this,

[00:03:58] you know, at the same time. So Depeche Mode and just a lot of great artists doing synth music back then.

[00:04:12] We sort of wanted that early 80s sound, but we didn't... But we wanted to modernize it. So that was sort of the beauty for this game.

[00:04:29] You've got a whole sound world to develop in these games, how do you go about doing that?

[00:04:33] I start off just immersing myself in what I think is going to be the world that I'm writing for. So in this case, like I read the script, I tried to understand the flow of the game. Most black ops games are not easy to follow. They're very convoluted and they go this way and that way. And it's really tough sometimes to understand the story until you're actually playing the game. It's really tough. This one was different. This one was very contained. It was about the Cold War. And you went off and you were doing this trying to get this information so you could do this and then go to the next place and do that. And it was very linear in the way. But I love to just immerse myself in the story and figure out the type of music I'm going to write before I write any notes of music at all, and I know everything I could possibly know. I've seen artwork and stuff like that. And when they finally have a level that is ready to be scored, somebody on the team will then do a video capture of the entire level, playing through at a reasonable pace, doing the golden path through the level.

[00:05:44] The golden path is the direct path through the game, and each level is like a scene. So if you're the composer, one thing you're deprived of is the surprise of figuring out where the story goes for yourself.

[00:05:54] And then I'll go off and write some themes, just like without looking at anything, I'll just write some themes based on what we all agree that the references are in the

tonality should be for the for the music. And the first piece I wrote. I think the very first piece I wrote was Bell's theme.

[00:06:26] Bell, like Ridge told us, is the character you play so your tension builds as these musical lines repeat and that 80 cents sound is water colored into the orchestration rather than dominating it. And just as you begin to wonder who this guy is, you get some clues.

[00:06:55] As soon as I heard it was Cold War is like I have to have a male Russian choir for sure. Singing in Russian You know, and that was that was a fun, fun way to go. There's all kinds of spoilers in the Russian lyrics, but Russians can't understand the lyrics because they're buried a little bit in the music, they're not so clear. And that was by design because I didn't want to give it away. But at some point I will publish those lyrics and they'll be excited to hear that. That was kind of fun. We just go through the level and decide where music's going to go, how long it's going to play, whether it's action music or ambient music or exploration, music or transitions or whatever, and then we decide how it gets implemented in the game. I'll start writing that level. I just write every almost usually in linear order. I just go write down the level and then I have to write transitions and make sure everything flows. And then we do experiments. My my assistant will take him in and make sure that they're implementing properly and working properly. He'll do the editing necessary to make that work. And then we send all of those files and one big chunk over to the guy in the developer side and he puts it in the game. They test it out. If there's anything I need to fix, then I'll fix it. So it's a process for sure, but now we're only at the placeholder music to see if it fits, it hasn't gone to the studio yet. The complicated part is that once that's done and everybody's happy with it, we have to then go record all that music. So I have to record it with orchestra and choir and any live musicians or whatever.

[00:08:41] And here is where Wall and Call of Duty tripped over the pandemic because that Russian choir sound wasn't just important to that Cold War sensibility. It's actually part of the story. And because singing has super spreader potential for covid-19 while had to find a way around having a choir in the studio. How did he do it? Find out after the break.

[00:09:40] Choir can't really be synthesized. So how did Jack Wall and the production team for Call of Duty put a Russian choir into their soundtrack?

[00:09:48] I was thinking a lot about that. Should we use a Russian choir? Should we use a choir? I couldn't I couldn't not do that. Right. So I had to find a way.

[00:09:56] We've talked about this a lot on classically speaking, but right now is the largest disruption to live music making in world history.

[00:10:04] In the era of covid. You cannot put just to put a finer point on this, you cannot put 32 people into a room and have them sing on top of each other. It just can't happen. Even if I wanted that to happen, it couldn't happen because the union wouldn't even allow it and they shouldn't.

[00:10:19] So the production team set out to recruit the mother of all virtual choirs, 30 singers with home recording setups who were up for a challenge.

[00:10:28] I had my engineer, Jason Larocha. He wrote a one page sort of instruction sheet about how he wanted each person to record, like how far away like they should do to their environment to sort some of this to. And then do two passes, one kind of like maybe six inches, six, eight inches from the mic, and then another pass where you turn the mic,

maybe 45 degrees. So it's off axis and it just colors the sound a little bit. So it adds a little depth, right.

[00:11:18] So not only did they record at home, they mimic the various distances singers would be from the microphones in a choral recording session. Complicated but not insurmountable. But there was one other thing. The lyrics were in Russian. For professional singers who are non-native speakers it's not so tricky when they're in a studio and can go phrase by phrase, repeating after the director. But this all had to be done with voice memos and guide tracks.

[00:11:43] There was a uniformity to the transliterations so that the singers would all understand, OK, when there's a schwa that means this, that was one step. And then then each section leader would do their version of a guide track. That was a long pauses. And then once that was all done, we sent it out to the rest of the singers and then they had it took a maybe four. I think we gave them like five or six days.

[00:12:12] So it usually takes four hours in a recording session, took about two weeks, and then we had to do it twice, we did it once in June and once in early September. So it was quite a bit of effort. It's a great team who made it all happen. And they were grateful to actually have some work because a lot of these singers can't work at all. It's really sad.

[00:12:29] But outside of the choir, it's all 80s.

[00:12:39] I have elements of that and say Bell's theme and 1981, because that's where we start with those two themes. Those two things had the had the arpeggiated sense and stuff like that and then rising tide, I wrote really late in the process that was the multiplayer theme that I wrote with Jimi Henson. The first bit I wrote was, I think the third level in the game, and all you're doing is being stealthy, you're just running around and hiding and trying not to be discovered. So that was kind of a fun one to write, because I knew that and I knew that there will be other opportunities to be massive and big and epic and all that stuff. So it was fun to kind of start in a small way. And then there was another piece I wrote that almost sounds a bit like stranger things, which I was trying to avoid for most of it.

[00:13:49] Even though stranger things, the Netflix show were military experiments affect kids in a 1980s small town and call of duty black ops, Cold War is the crossover. I want to see.

[00:13:58] The visual was this really old looking computer and you were you were hacking into it. It's sort of like walking into this probably much older than 80s, you know, probably in the 70s and you know, that green screen with the green writing on it, remember Pong, something like that. You're hacking into this computer, this old computer, and I just added, I just created this sort of like very Cynthy, very 80s kind of sound for that very Vangelis. And it's it's that was a fun one to write. I wish I could have written a longer piece, but it was a short, short, little bit.

[00:14:54] Once recording sessions are done and edited walls, placeholder tracks get upgraded to the new polished studio tracks. I've always enjoyed video game music, but this is a pretty big advancement from what I grew up with. How did it go from this? To this? Apparently, the answer has a lot to do with computer memory storage.

[00:15:24] Prior to 1993, there was no CD rom, so the biggest storage media you had were floppy disks, which held, I think, like a megabyte or five megabytes or something. And then

suddenly you jump to CD, CD-ROM, you got 70 megabytes or whatever it is. So that didn't mean we could have as much room as we wanted until DVD came out. Then we could have as much as we wanted.

[00:15:47] And it's not just the storage in the game itself, it's the accessibility and portability of recording equipment now. Imagine if we were trying to do virtual choirs in 1995, it would have been a very different pandemic artistically.

[00:16:00] Everything has been improving ever since then.

[00:16:03] You know, the from the digital audio workstations we use and the functionality of those to being able to record audio on a laptop to you know, we're all using really, really great microphones, Mike pre-s and better plug ins and better instruments and everything.

[00:16:26] The call of duty games are about war, so I'm sure they can feel pretty dystopian story wise, did that hit differently now in this pandemic? And do you think it comes across in the music?

[00:16:39] It didn't really feel dystopian throughout the gameplay until until the very end? Right. So, you know, then you're dealing with whether the whole world is going to blow up or not. You know, that's that's a really important feeling to come across at the very end. And it was it was like, whoa, this is pretty serious stuff right here. So it was scored epically at the end because it was an epic moment.

[00:17:13] How long was your runway for the whole thing?

[00:17:16] I started in February and we were writing all the way up till September 15th. Timing is actually we have a lot that's a lot of time because when I do television, like I have to thirty like thirty five minutes of music in a week, you know, my first idea is the best idea. Go.

[00:17:32] Do you crave creating in your own story or do you enjoy having the guidelines and constraints of someone else creating the narrative for you.

[00:17:41] The creative constraints that media provides are awesome. It's easy because I just look at what is on the screen in it. I can hear it in my head when I look at that, you know, or at least I've trained myself to be able to do that. Right. That's really how I do it. It's just I get I get very inspired by what I see on the screen.

[00:18:08] Jack Wall composes music for video games. As far as careers go. That sounds pretty cool. Check out his advice for parents of young videogame fans with some musical interest in the show. Notes at Nashville Classical Radio.org.

[00:18:29] Classically speaking is a production of Nashville Public Radio. The show is edited by Anita Bugg and mastered by Carl Pedersen. Find us on social media and let us know what your favorite video game soundtrack is for classically speaking on Facebook and Instagram and speak classical on Twitter. I'm Colleen Phelps. Glad you used your backstage pass to classical music, classically speaking.