Video game music goes mainstream

Pop stars, rappers, movie composers writing music for games

Thursday, August 11, 2005; Posted: 12:12 a.m. EDT (04:12 GMT)

LOS ANGELES, California (AP) -- Violinists playing sweetly beneath her, the video game heroine Lara Croft has two guns blazing and the full attention of 10,000 people at the Hollywood Bowl.

The animated star of "Tomb Raider" games, which have collectively sold more than 30 million copies, unflinchingly braves explosions on a giant TV screen that hangs, incongruously, above the Los Angeles Philharmonic orchestra.

At the bizarre yet beautiful debut performance of Video Games Live, the sotto voce murmurs of the "Tomb Raider" theme give way to choir-assisted crescendos then to more crowd-pleasing music and images from other games.

The spectacle, which promoters say will be performed by similarly topflight orchestras in more than 15 cities in the coming months, is just the latest sign that songs written for the interactive gaming world are blasting out of consoles and into the mainstream.

Orchestra concerts of music from "Final Fantasy" games -- a long-running role-playing series with a cult-like following -- have sold out venues nationwide.

Video games with their rising budgets are now attracting serious composing talent. Scoring for traditional television may soon enough be playing second fiddle.

Award-winning film composers such as Danny Elfman of "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory" and Howard Shore of "The Lord of the Rings" trilogy have written music for games. Shore recently completed work on the upcoming "SUN," an online role-playing game set in a medieval world of emperors and monsters.

And hit singles such as Green Day's "American Idiot" were heard on the hugely popular "Madden NFL Football" games even before they got radio play. In fact, 14 of the 21 songs in the game's latest version, to be released Tuesday, are previously unreleased. The new version features music from Foo Fighters, Rev. Run of Run-DMC fame and others.

It's all a sonic leap from the blips and beeps of "Pong" and "Asteroids" -- so memorably annoying they've come to define game audio for decades.

"The music in video games is basically maturing to the spot where it can live outside" of home systems, said Chuck Doud, music director for Sony Computer Entertainment.

Like movie scores, game soundtracks seldom top the charts, though a few have been big sellers.

The score from "Halo 2," an Xbox game that pits players against alien invaders, has sold about 100,000 copies since its release late last year. Sales of the "Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within" soundtrack have reached 47,000 copies since being released in 2003, according to Nielsen SoundScan.

Video game music's growing popularity is being driven by budgets that can now reach hundreds of thousands of dollars, spending that has climbed along with overall industry revenue.

In the United States, video game industry sales now exceed movie box office receipts. "Halo 2" generated more than $125 million in sales on its first day alone.

Composer Tommy Tallarico, co-creator of Video Games Live, says his music budget was about $300,000 for "Advent Rising" -- the first game in a planned intergalactic trilogy with dialogue and stories by science fiction writer Orson Scott Card.

Orchestras and choirs recorded Tallarico's 13th century Italian opera-inspired songs on a stage at the Paramount Pictures lot.

"In movies, you write to picture, you write to the scene, and it's considered background music," said Tallarico. "I consider us foreground music."

Indeed, the audio component of games is becoming an increasingly interactive part of the story. Games are programmed so scores react to virtual environments and player choices. Multiple sound backdrops shift with scenarios.
Instead of switching to entirely new music when a character, say, enters an eerie courtyard, the emphasis subtly shifts to a previously soft-playing track, using different instruments to ratchet up the tension.

The effect, Doud says, is that "all of a sudden it'll seem a lot more intense, but you can't really tell how it got there."

Maybe, just maybe, it's enough to keep people listening after spending dozens of hours playing a single game.

"That's what you're striving for, is to have the player hold off muting the music," said Garry Schyman, who composed an hour of 1950s sci-fi movie-style music for the alien invader game "Destroy All Humans!"

Schyman has also written scores for small films, documentaries and TV movies. Now he's anxious for more video game work.

"I had a blast," he said. "Plus, it pays well. They have the money for orchestras. Television these days rarely has money for orchestras."

A composer for video games is typically paid from $700 to $1,500 for each minute of music -- more if it's being produced for an orchestra, he said.

One fan of the music is Ben Krugliak, a 13-year-old who attended the Video Games Live show. His favorite song at the concert came from the original "Halo," and he still listens to the soundtrack on his iPod -- even after hearing the same "sad music" over and over while playing the game.

"Sometimes when I first got it, I listened to it before bed, because it just relaxes me," he said.

Krugliak said he came to enjoy the bands Nine Inch Nails and Jimmy Eat World while playing the racing game "Midnight Club 3: DUB Edition," which features their songs "The Hand That Feeds" and "Pain," respectively. Krugliak later paid to download both songs.

Such taste-making power has artists and promoters lining up to get spots on new games.

Some games, however, demand original scores.

"You will never hear a licensed tune in 'Star Wars' games, Tallarico said. "The big epics are always going to have to have original music."

At the Video Games Live concert last month, Krugliak was selected to go onstage in the most high-concept part of the show - a "Frogger" contest in which the orchestra adjusted its play on-the-fly to fit game action.

Navigating a frog across traffic and other obstacles in the classic Atari game, he outscored a middle-aged woman 1,970 to 170. The woman said she'd never played a video game before -- exactly the type of person Tallarico hopes to attract to the concerts.

He says parents who don't play might be surprised at the quality of in-game choirs and orchestras.

"Their eyes are going to be opened up to what an amazing art form video games and their music have become," said Tallarico. "It's not a bunch of bleeps and bloops."

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