
NEWS

Review: 'Video Games Live' is rollicking rock-opera homage to the popular medium

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Video games are a bigger deal than Hollywood films these days, so it's not surprising that homages to gaming and gamers are springing up all over.

On a recent visit to Silicon Valley's Exploratorium museum — think Science Museum of Minnesota blended with Minnesota Children's Museum — I saw an announcement for an exhibit of "modded" (customized) video-gaming computers. Yay! But I was to miss it by days. Boo.

On Saturday night, I saw something better. "Video Games Live," a longtime touring celebration of video-gaming music with sequences from famed games thrown up on gigantic displays, played at Minneapolis' Orchestra Hall and ... rocked my world.

This was, indeed, a rock opera of sorts — which must have been a novelty for the Minnesota Orchestra classical musicians who were the backbone of the performance (along with a terrific youth chorus).

“Video Games Live” co-founder Tommy Tallarico played his electric guitars during much of the show — with partner and the show’s conductor, Jack Wall, briefly joining in on acoustic guitar — musically interpreting the likes of “Final Fantasy” and “Castlevania.”

The games, though, were the main draws.

The show kicked off with a frenetic tribute to the classics — ranging from “Pong” and “Asteroids” to “Donkey Kong,” “Mario Kart” and “Dragon’s Lair” — synced to the musical likes of “Ride of the Valkyries” and “Night on Bald Mountain.” The montage culminated with a “Tetris” tribute set to Russian Cossack music that ended in a great big “Hey!” (with the word “Hey!” appearing on two big screens, naturally).

Other segments celebrated such game franchises as “Metal Gear Solid” (with a pudgy actor in combat fatigues appearing on stage for a brief bit of comic relief) and “God of War” (enriched, appropriately enough, by a goddess of an opera singer).

I’ll pause here to confess that, while I am a geek, I am not a video-game geek, and so much of what transpired Saturday was Greek to me. I often didn’t know what the skewing-young audience members were cheering about — and, golly, they cheered a lot.

That is why I took along my gaming-obsessed 12-year-old. The boy was bopping and weaving in his seat to melodies from his treasured “Super Mario Bros.” and “The Legend of Zelda.” We both adore “Halo,” though, and all but swooned during a youth-chorus-enhanced tribute to the human war against the evil alien Covenant.

The show was big on audience participation.

A young woman came on stage at one point to play a gigantic version of “Space Invaders” — the sliding on-screen gun platform matched her body movements. Later on, a “Guitar Hero” fanatic won over the audience by refusing to play on “hard” — he insisted on “expert” — and then rocking the house, with Tallarico on electric guitar, to Van Halen’s “Jump.”

In another of my favorite moments, Tallarico encouraged audience members to wave cell phones, rock-concert style, in lieu of Bic lighters (I waved my Droid). It was deliciously weird to see hundreds of teeny screens — and, reportedly, at least one iPad — undulating in the last place you’d expect.

Martin Leung, the “video game pianist” famous for a blindfolded medley of “Mario” tunes, appeared several times to pound the keys of a full-size piano (blindfolded at one point, of course, to a standing ovation). The show also featured on-screen greetings from game-industry greats.

“Video Games Live” sagged only when it deviated from gaming — why the show included a too-long tribute to Disney animated films is beyond me.

I had expected to be mildly amused by this event, but found myself cackling and pumping my fists in the air toward the end. My son had a great time, too, as did someone behind me who moaned, “It’s not over, c’mon.” (There was a rock-concert-style encore with two bonus numbers, thank goodness.)

It is amazing “how culturally significant and artistic video games have become,” Tallarico, a gaming-industry veteran who has worn many hats and worked on more than 275 titles, told the audience. Yet, when dreaming up the now-years-old road show, “everyone thought we were completely insane.

“We’re playing video-game music tonight,” Tallarico said. “How cool is that?”

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Julio Ojeda-Zapata covers technology for the Pioneer Press’ business and features desks. He also sometimes writes about pop-culture topics of a nerdy nature. In his spare time, Julio writes for the TidBITS Apple-enthusiast site, where he is a contributing editor. He’s published books about Twitter, the iPad, and mobile productivity. See his blog at ojezap.com. As a Puerto Rico transplant, he prefers his St. Paul weather hot and muggy, but he’s been known to strap on a snowboard. He loves to dig into a thick sci-fi novel, make sushi rolls, brew perfect café, kick back with a red IPA, and dance a mean merengue.



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