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Video Games (No Controller Needed)

By SETH SCHIESEL OCT. 26, 2009

Since my first Allman Brothers concert almost two decades ago, I have paid retail to attend at least 50 sold-out rock concerts at the Beacon Theater on Broadway.

Yet I had never seen hundreds of people enter the concert hall a full hour before showtime until Sunday night, when “Video Games Live” sold out the hall. There were a few things to actually do in the lobby beforehand, like participate in a Guitar Hero competition and a costume contest, but most of the crowd showed up early just to hang out.

Tommy Tallarico and Jack Wall, the video-game music composers who created and direct “Video Games Live,” put on a captivating, proudly bombastic show. But that demonstration of community on the part of the audience was almost as impressive as anything on the stage.

That is not faint praise. The term “multimedia presentation” is dry, but it is perhaps the only way to fully describe the spectacle of several dozen classical musicians, the Temple University Concert Choir, two guitarists and a female flutist dressed as an elf, all playing music from the Japanese video games Chrono Cross and Chrono Trigger while three large video screens suspended above the stage displayed scenes from the games in sync with the music.

And who watched all this, filling the hall with as much applause, hooting and hollering as I have ever heard at the Beacon? There was a smattering of parents with children, but most people in the crowd were couples and groups of guys in their 20s and 30s. Shocking as it may sound, there were even some people over 40

unaccompanied by minors. And this on a night when the Yankees were playing the Angels for a spot in the World Series.

The company behind “Video Games Live” presents about 60 shows a year around the world featuring local musicians in collaboration with Mr. Tallarico, Mr. Wall and a rotating cast of soloists. Yet the success of the touring series is only one manifestation of the increasingly felicitous, not to mention profitable, confluence between video games and music.

“Video Games Live” highlights the music in games that are primarily about other things, like saving the galaxy from aliens, defeating the undead or rescuing princesses from bad guys. But there are now also popular games that allow an approximation of playing music (Guitar Hero, Rock Band), that are built around singing (SingStar, Lips) and that are about the culture of music (Brütal Legend).

Popular musicians from Kiss to 50 Cent are eager to get their new songs into games. Conversely, some music fans now turn to the latest games to discover new tracks. Rockstar Games, maker of Grand Theft Auto, has even collaborated with the record producer and rapper Timbaland to release a music-creation program called Beaterator. The twist is that although Beaterator is made by a video-game company for what is generally considered a video-game system, Sony’s PlayStation Portable, there is no actual game in the game. Instead, Beaterator is akin to a mini hand-held Pro Tools studio setup.

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Meanwhile, DJ Hero, which hopes to do for hip-hop and dance music what Guitar Hero did for rock — that is, get millions of people spinning and scratching faux-turntable controllers in their living rooms — is scheduled for release by Activision on Tuesday. Jay-Z was holding court at the Plaza hotel in Manhattan on Monday to promote the game, and Grandmaster Flash, who voices the tutorial in DJ Hero, was part of a panel discussion on the convergence of music and games at Carnegie Hall last week.

The real star of that panel was Alex Rigopulos, chief executive and co-founder of Harmonix Music Systems, creators of Guitar Hero and Rock Band. Until now, releasing a song for those games has required game developers to translate the track into a format that works with the software. But in his most provocative remarks, Mr. Rigopulos said he wanted to develop a more open Rock Band network that allows artists to publish music for use in the game essentially on their own. His hope is that Rock Band could evolve from a mere music game into a broader online platform for music distribution.

It is all a long way from the beeps and bleeps of the first video games. As part of “Video Games Live” on Sunday, Mr. Tallarico conducted a live video interview via Skype with Ralph H. Baer, the engineer who can lay as solid a claim as anyone to have invented the modern video game. (He also invented the classic hand-held electronic game Simon.) Their conversation almost felt like a lesson in video-game history for the audience.

And then it was back to music — mostly medleys of themes from various games in series like Warcraft, Halo or Final Fantasy — accompanied by synchronized video footage from the games. Mr. Wall conducted the symphony of about 50 musicians while Mr. Tallarico bounced around the stage as host and occasional guitarist. Martin Leung, a pianist who gained fame on YouTube, brought down the house with his signature blindfolded performance of the theme from Super Mario Brothers.

Mr. Tallarico said in an interview that he hopes the popularity of “Video Games Live” reflects the advance of video games over the last several decades.

“I’m 41 years old, and we’re the first generation to grow up with video games and computers and MTV and the Internet,” he said. “And just because we turned 40 we didn’t stop playing video games, and now we’re having children and in the next 20 years we’ll be becoming grandparents, and then we’ll be all through the culture.”

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