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Musicians Are Making Tracks to Video Games

Popularity of Interactive Play Has Artists Battling to Be Heard

By Jose Antonio Vargas

Washington Post Staff Writer

Thursday, December 9, 2004; Page A01

The Game -- aka Jayceon Taylor -- isn't a star. Not yet, at least. But it helps that big-shot producer Dr. Dre is on his side, working on a few cuts on the Game's debut album, set to drop in mid-January.

To break into the sardine-can hip-hop scene, the Game needs to tour, hit the FM waves, make the rounds on MTV.

One more thing: "It'd be really, really hot to get on Madden," the 25-year-old MC says from a recording studio in California's San Fernando Valley.

He's talking about the most lucrative franchise in the multibillion-dollar video game industry, selling more than 40 million units since its launch in 1989. Madden NFL 2004 was last year's top-selling game, and Madden NFL 2005 is poised to be near the top again this year.

The competition to get onto the game's soundtrack -- a lineup of thumping, furious, go-play-ball songs -- is fierce. Last year record labels sent more than 2,500 songs to vie for the game's 21 tracks, which included Hoobastank's "Same Direction," New Found Glory's "This Disaster" and Yung Wun's "Yung Wun Anthem."

In the past three years, particularly this year, the link between the music industry and the video game industry -- the former in a revenue slump, the latter on a revenue high -- has gotten only closer. For example, the rock-punk band Incubus wrote music for Halo 2, and Snoop Dogg's cover of the Doors classic "Riders on the Storm" made its debut on Need for Speed Underground 2. Both

enlarge photo



Fledgling hip-hop artist Jayceon Taylor, known as the Game, is hoping to make the soundtrack of a popular video game. (Jonathan Mannion)

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games were released last month.

For artists as established as Green Day, whose "American Idiot" has just been nominated for a Grammy as record of the year, winning a spot on Madden NFL's soundtrack is like having a 20-second commercial on "Monday Night Football" or "Desperate Housewives." For an up-and-comer such as the Game, it's an even bigger deal, the kind of break that gives instant celebrity. For both, it's a new route to an old audience, as sure a bet as any when it comes to grabbing a prized demographic: 18-to-34-year-old males, 75 percent of whom play video games, according to Nielsen Interactive Entertainment.

"I play Madden, like, 30 hours or 40 hours a week, easy," says Nick Schwartz, 24, standing outside the Black Cat, a popular indie-rock club on 14th Street NW. The software technician says he first heard the song "American Idiot" on Madden NFL 2005, not on the radio or MTV. The song is also the title of Green Day's punk-rock album, which this week scored six Grammy nominations. Justin Yu, a friend of Schwartz's, interrupts. The 27-year-old Web designer, a "huge basketball fanatic," says he discovered the rapper Fabolous two years ago, on NBA Live 2003. With his busy work schedule, "playing basketball means taking out the PlayStation."

In the past five years, that 18-to-34 male demographic has been increasingly turning on the television not to watch a show but to play video games, says Michael Dowling, general manager of Nielsen Interactive.

"Music in video game soundtracks has become a place for retro-classics, to hear new artists and for exciting artists to stretch and do different kinds of material," says Casey Patterson of the MTV spinoff Spike TV, the self-described first network for men. On Nov. 30 the network, with Artemis Records, released a compilation CD, "Hits Vol. 1: Best of Video Game Music," and on Tuesday it will hold its second annual Video Game Awards. Snoop Dogg, a big gamer himself, is the host.

The primitive *blip-blop* sound of Pong is history. So are the mind-numbing melodies of Donkey Kong and Super Mario. The industry took a significant turn when Trent Reznor, the Nine Inch Nails frontman, wrote music for the game Quake in 1996. Three years later, David Bowie composed songs for the fantasy game Omikron: The Nomad Soul.

What was once considered mere sound effects, nothing more than background music, is now viewed as vital to a game. You're seeing the game. You're feeling the game. You're hearing the game. You don't play these games and press the mute button -- it would be like watching "Law & Order" without the *tan-tan-tan-tan-tan*, or the quirky little sound that signals scene changes.

Those who play Nintendo's long-running adventure game Legend of Zelda would have a hard time imagining it without the hypnotic, orchestral sound of Japanese composer Koji Konodo, the Mozart of video game composers. Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas, which released an eight-disc soundtrack, would be weird without the old-school punk or classic hip-hop of the early '90s, the period in which the game is set.

Now the video game companies are asking artists to write music specifically for their games, and the artists are eager to oblige. Take the Grammy-nominated group Black Eyed Peas. In what Electronic Arts, publisher of The Urbz: Sims in the City, says is

the first partnership of its kind, the band rerecorded nine of its songs in Simlish, the game's own language. The band members are also four of 65 characters in the game.

"If iTunes were the story in 2003, then video games are the story this year, as major recording companies found that soundtracks for new games introduced new music to listeners almost more than any other medium," says Shahid Khan, a managing director with the McLean-based consulting firm BearingPoint. In the past year, Khan has met with music executives to discuss this new market. "In due time, video game soundtracks are going to be as popular as film soundtracks," he says.

This convergence is inevitable to Cary Sherman, president of the Recording Industry Association of America. "There's been more of an effort in the past year by video game companies and record companies to find a match and create a game that's bigger than the sum of its parts. It's great for the video game. It's great for the artist," says Sherman.

To veteran producer Nile Rodgers, founding member of the R&B band Chic who perhaps is best known as a writer of the song "We Are Family," creating music for video games is about risk-taking, "something sorely lacking in the music industry." In the process of writing music for Halo 2 -- with its tribal drums, Gregorian chant and atmospheric vibe -- Rodgers, who also produced the game's soundtrack, asked members of Breaking Benjamin, Hoobastank and Incubus: What would that motif inspire you to do?

"The world of video game soundtracks represents the '60s, the rock-and-roll rebellious frame of mind I had when I first got into this business," says Rodgers, who has worked with Madonna, Mick Jagger and Diana Ross, and whose film scores include "Thelma and Louise" and "Beverly Hills Cop." "You're playing a video game 30 to 40 to 50 hours a week, sometimes more than that. The music you hear is an integral part of your psyche, and I think fans are going to demand that we push the envelope more and more."

That's what Steve Schnur, the Clive Davis of the video-game industry, excels in. The worldwide executive of music for industry leader Electronic Arts started off at MTV, spent a few years at Capitol Records and has a knack for finding the right talent for the right game. In a way, Schnur can be credited with helping jump-start the careers of lesser-known bands.

The alternative rock band Good Charlotte's song "The Anthem," from the group's second album, "The Young and the Restless," landed a spot on Madden NFL 2003. Before the game came out, the band had sold about 300,000 copies of the album; afterward, it sold 3.5 million copies, says Billy Martin, who plays guitar and keyboards for the group.

"Before Madden came out, not many people knew who our band was," Martin, 23, says from Philadelphia shortly after the band finished touring. There isn't a day on the bus, he says, that band members don't play a video game. "Not every person who plays sports games listens to Good Charlotte, so someone who's never heard of us before bought our album because they liked what they heard on Madden. I remember some kid in a football jersey, in a mall somewhere, saying to us, 'I know you guys. Madden, right?'"

Not long from now, a "paradigm shift" in popular music will take

hold, Schnur says. In the early '80s, in the time of MTV, the hit song became real when you heard it while watching its video. In about 10 years, he says, the hit song will become real when gamers hear it on their consoles or computers.

"Most artists, particularly those who are gamers, know that their potential fans are playing video games right now," says Schnur. "Being on a video game, other than live performance, is the best way to get the ears and eyes of new fans."

From now until April, Schnur, who works out of EA's Playa Vista office, will be listening to hundreds of songs for Madden NFL 2006. He makes up a final list -- most likely more than 21 songs -- by June.

The Game, of course, wants badly to be on that soundtrack.

The latest Dr. Dre find is a son of Compton, the birthplace of the storied gangsta rap group N.W.A. The Game plays Madden NFL online, in addition to Halo 2 on his Xbox and Grand Theft Auto on his PlayStation 2. He's still figuring out which songs -- maybe "Higher," maybe "Fresh '83" -- to send to Schnur. "It'll be fight music: Put your helmet on, strap on your shoulder pads, strap on your cleats and kick some [expletive]," he says.

"I'm gonna be on that game. If not, I'm not playing it no more."

He laughs. But underneath the joking is an artist craving exposure. "It's not just a game, you know," he says.

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