

Music world hits new high note

Videogamers' profile

'exactly the same' and labels learn to play along

By T.L. STANLEY

GRAMMY-WINNING R&B artist Mya steps up to center stage on "The Tonight Show With Jay Leno" and belts out a jazzy number, but it's not the single from her latest record.

Instead, it's the theme song from Electronic Arts' new James Bond videogame "007: Everything or Nothing," in which the sultry 24-year-old singer stars as a character, alongside Pierce Brosnan, Willem Dafoe and Judi Dench. Mr. Leno, ever the promoter of his guests' new projects, holds up a copy of the game before and after the singer's performance.

So intertwined now are the worlds of music and videogaming that the two couldn't be pried apart with the best Bond-esque gadget.

Where just a few years ago, videogames were stuck with somewhat unsophisticated kinds of sound—retro, but not in a good way—they now sport exclusive, customized music from the hottest pop and urban artists, and tracks from the most sought-after up-and-comers.

These artists' exposure will only increase as massively multiplayer online games gain in popularity. For example, Microsoft Corp.'s Xbox Live online service allows multiplayer gaming and in less than two years has attracted 750,000 subscribers worldwide. With the potential to simultaneously link thousands of players for hours at a time, MMOGs could become a medium akin to radio for a pop artist.

"Videogame companies and record labels have realized they can forge cooperative relationships that benefit both," says Steve Schnur, Electronic Arts' worldwide executive of music. "The core consumer of both our products is exactly the same."

GROWING UP GAMERS

The musical artists themselves are part of the gamer nation, and for the first time in history, there's an entire generation of contemporary, mostly young male musicians who grew up playing videogames. As Nielsen Media Research and others have reported, that demographic is increasingly turning away from traditional entertainment like TV, and spending more time online and with other media. The videogame business in the U.S. alone pulls in some \$10 billion a year.

"The growth in videogames has been astounding—this is where our consumers have gone," says Courtney Holt, head of new media and strategic marketing at Universal Music Group's Interscope Records. "It's a tremendous marketing opportunity for us."

There are a number of reasons, demographics being the most obvious, that the music and videogame businesses are collaborating. Consolidation in radio and

fierce competition for plum exposure like MTV have made the record labels look elsewhere for promotional boosts. And then there's the current malaise in the music industry, still grappling with illegal downloading and slumping sales.

"It's another distribution medium for their content," says Rob Sebastian, an agent at Endeavor who specializes in the videogame industry. "It's a promotional platform."

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TUNED UP: Singer Mya is among a number of characters appearing in James Bond games.



It's also an invaluable selling tool. Music executives now synch up their record releases to coincide with street dates of highly anticipated videogames in hopes of landing some songs on a huge seller like EA's "Madden NFL" franchise or Rockstar Games' "Grand Theft Auto" series.

"The videogame business outsells the music business," says Mack Hill, VP-commercial, videogame and international synch licensing at Warner Music Group's Warner Strategic Marketing. "It's a new area of media with a very defined demo and culture. It's more and more important for us to find those music placements."

The vast majority of gamers currently play on consoles like Xbox and Sony Computer Entertainment's PlayStation 2. But in their next generation, these will evolve into all-in-one entertainment centers with multiplayer and TiVo capability and MP3s along with their already built-in DVDs and CD players.

There will be further opportunities there for record labels to embed their products.

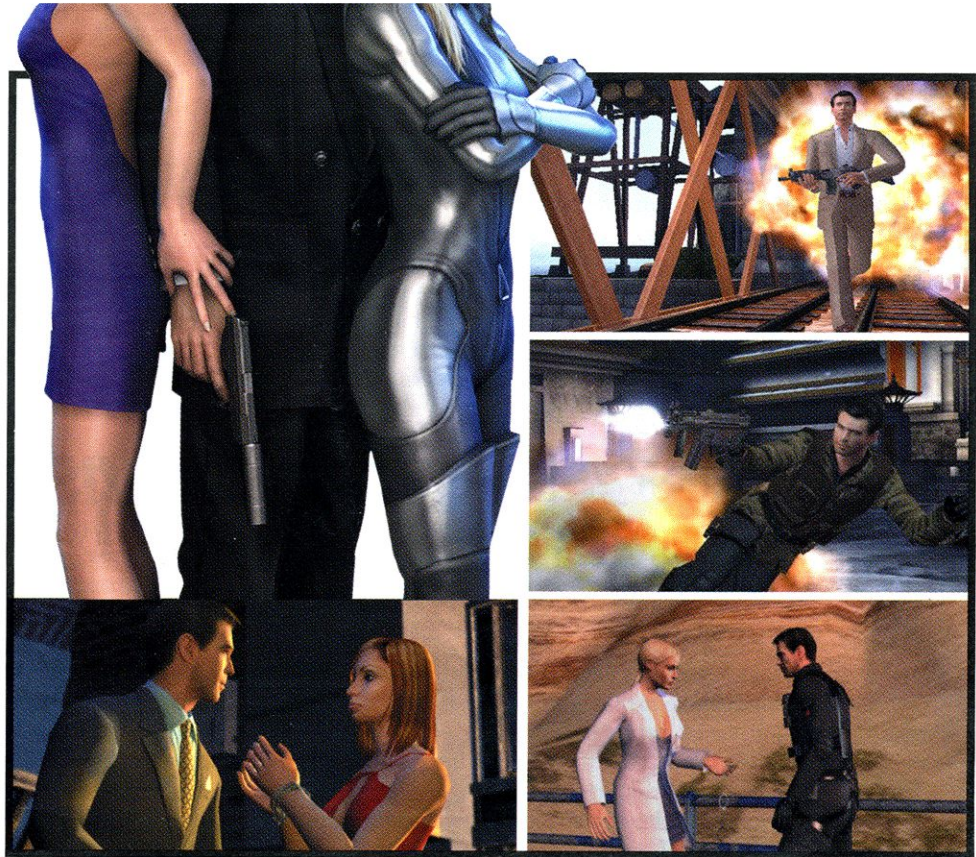
For now, it's the software—games like EA's "SSX3" and Sony's "WipEout"—that get all the musical action. Online gaming, which offers multiplayer potential, accounts for only about 5% of the total gaming world but is growing quickly, and could be the next frontier for digital music delivery. As technology progresses, music industry executives expect they will spend more time marrying their product with the online gaming experience.

"There's a lot of potential there for the user to create custom versions of the music," Mr. Hill says, "and to buy the music online as they're hearing it in the game."

Record labels have grown to love videogames for the licensing fees and awareness they generate. And, importantly, for the security. It's nearly impossible to copy music from a videogame.

SPECIFIC GAME TRACKS

Videogame publishers, meanwhile, want to add value and relevance to their products by infusing them with the hottest music. Music in games used to be an afterthought, Mr. Schnur says, with games mired in "a Good Humor, Casio kind of sound." Not anymore.



Some of the most popular rock, pop, rap and techno artists create tracks specifically for games or break a song there ahead of its radio debut.

Multi-platinum artists ranging from Blink-182 and Korn to Snoop Dogg and DMX have done so. Icons like Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails have composed original scores for games. Some musical artists also get themselves into the game, like Mya, Snoop, Method Man and Ludacris.

"It's a qualitative value-add to the consumer," Mr. Sebastian says. "It creates a bigger, bolder, higher production value experience. It hits the senses."

It's important for videogame publishers to be ahead of the curve—in effect, programming the radio station of the future. A recent deal between Vivendi Universal's Universal Music Group and game publisher Atari will put the label's percolating new act, Dropbox, in a game called "Transformers." Gamers who solve problems will hear the band's music as a reward. The band is using

footage from the game in its music video, and both companies will continuously cross-promote each other's product in advertising, events and other communications.

For an established artist, videogame exposure is "a feather in their cap," says Mr. Holt, "a way to show that they're still relevant." For a young band, videogame exposure could mean the difference between success and failure.

"There are examples of songs that have made such a big impact in a television commercial that they can launch an artist," says Dave Curtain, founder and creative director of DeepMix, which pairs music with advertisers, films and videogames. "It's happening now with videogames. If you're trying to launch a band, videogames have to be part of your plan." ■