



Play that funky music Gameboy

BY TOM LOFTUS, MSNBC, OCTOBER 1st 2003

In the basement of a Bowery Street bar in lower Manhattan a musician was working the crowd like a younger (and geekier) version of Keith Richards. Slung waist high was not a guitar, but a PC keyboard connected, somehow, to a Nintendo Gameboy so that every time he punched the keys -- "Bloop! Bloop! Bloop! -- sounds straight out of a video game bounced off the walls. The crowd was digging the scene. This was down and dirty indie music at its finest.

THE EVENT was a celebration of 8-bit music sponsored by Micromusic.net, a European-based web site that champions "Low Tech Music For High Tech People." It was a night not easily forgotten. Blocky, pixilated video game visuals straight from the 1970s lit up the cavernous basement as one musician after another walked up to a cable strewn platform to conjure strange sounds from a messy collection of old game hardware.

This 8-bit music -- or "chiptunes" as the sound is also known -- may be the one video game related subculture you've never heard about. Built around the "bleeps" and "bloops" of video gaming's Paleozoic era, the music has gained a following over the years among assorted hackers, gamers and musicians. It's particularly large in Europe, where Micromusic.net sponsored music festivals have attracted upwards of 5,000 attendees. And in the United States, "the scene" also appears to be growing thanks to a number of factors including the diversity of its music, the hacker sensibility underlining the scene and nostalgia for old fashioned video gaming.

And besides, it's fun.

FASHIONABLE AND POLITICAL nostalgia

A search for "8-bit music" on the web will turn up a number of web sites festooned with ASCII art or 1970s-era pixilated graphics and copy that reads like its straight out the liner notes of a Kraftwerk album. So fashionably retro.

"I don't think it's about nostalgia, but technology," said 8-bit music promoter Ihu Anyanwu. "Right now there's too much fetishization of new technology. This music is all about simplicity."

Back in the day (i.e. the 1970s and 1980s) consoles like the Nintendo NES could dedicate only so much hardware and programming to sound effects and music. The resulting sounds were big and blocky and often about as musical as a dentist humming to the sound of his drill. But they were memorable and -- to an 8-bit music enthusiast at least -- extremely pure.

Over the years musicians have since created software that allows them to tap into the sound capabilities of these old game platforms -- as well as the newer Nintendo Gameboy. Some have mixed the resulting 8-bit sound through modern software to create music ranging from techno to experimental. Others have left the "bleeps" and "bloops" unadulterated creating a sound that is simultaneously nostalgic and futuristic.

"I hope people see that there is some degree of musical sophistication," said Josh Davis, a Gameboy musician. "There is a novelty factor, yes. But we are making deliberate aesthetic choices."

GETTING MORE WITH LESS

So who are these people?

Co-founder of "8bitpeoples," a collective of artists influenced by the sights and sounds of classic video games, Jeremiah Johnson -- aka Nullsleep -- composes music on the Nintendo Gameboy and the 15-year-old Nintendo NES. His recent works include Gameboy remakes of songs by the 1980s synth band Depeche Mode. Note for note the compositions follow the original tunes, but with a distinct Gameboy sound. The end result are works that are electronic, yet surprisingly warm.

"I grew up mostly as a Nintendo and Atari kid, and the sound of the NES holds something special for me," said Johnson. "It's not nostalgia so much as it is the act of using something I've known so well in a certain context and rediscovering it in a whole new way that is truly exciting."

Johnson, who recently completed studies in both computer science and music at Columbia University, has a programmer's fascination for 8-bit music's overriding artistic challenge: doing more with less. "You're really pushed to improve your skills more than you would be working in an environment when you can just say, toss some extra effects on it," he said.

Making "pop music out of 1980's computer trash," Dallas based musician and programmer Paul Slocum composes on an even more limited video game platform -- the 26-year old Atari 2600. Other instruments include a 1989 portable 286 PC, a 1983 Commodore 64 computer, and a 1985 Epson dot matrix printer with its chip reprogrammed to operate as a synthesizer.

What started years ago with Slocum playing the game "Pitfall" on an Atari 2600 to the beat of his band led to the creation of a sequencer. The invention allowed him the ability to program and burn a tune onto an Atari 2600 cartridge and play it through the console. The sequencer was followed by the Synthcart, a cartridge that turned the Atari console into an instrument when used in tandem with a pair of joysticks.

It's the irony of ironies that Slocum uses one of the oldest gaming platforms to help in creating the warmest -- and most human -- of sounds in the 8-bit music scene. "Others may use their Gameboys and C64s to make music that sounds old or techno. I'm trying to do the opposite," Slocum said. "I'm taking old computers and using them to sound organic."

You don't need to be a hacker to create 8-bit music. Gameboy musicians, for example, have the option of two software programs -- LittleSoundDJ and Nanoloop -- that open up the Gameboy's four channels to a non-technical audience. Using the keypad, musicians can construct loops, add instruments and drums and tweak a number of Gameboy variables.

Haeyoung Kim is a classically trained pianist who just happens to appreciate what she calls a "warm 8-bit sound." "When I make music, it's about the music itself and not the idea of using a GameBoy," she said.

Through Nanoloop, Kim can quickly tap into the Gameboy's "warm 8-bit sound," extract the sounds she wants, mix them through her laptop and create aural landscapes that sound more like movie soundtracks than video games.

Meanwhile, back in the Bowery

A large part of 8-bit music's popularity rests with its association with the "golden age" of video gaming; back when games were simpler and the opening musical sequence of "Donkey Kong" was considered an aural masterpiece.

Back on Bowery St., Seth Sternberger, aka Naughty Boy, was behind his Commodore 64 mixing modern beats to the plaintive "bloops" of an old C64 game. As the electronic "whirrs" of the C64's Sound Interface Device -- the single chip synthesizer was a sonic wonder 20 years ago -- collided with drums and bass the overall effect was eerily retro-futuristic; simultaneously conjuring visions of club land bacchanalia and memories of pre-pubescent nights spent with "Space Invaders." "This kind of video game-inspired amplifies the fun factor," Sternberger later said, "by reminding you of the good times of video games."

Later that night Josh Davis, aka Bitshifter, took the stage. He worked two Gameboys, frantically pushing the tiny keypads to add and remove drum loops to compositions he had pre-recorded and loaded into his Gameboy courtesy of a mega memory card.

There was something a little odd to the scene of a musician bobbing his head while staring at a tiny LCD screen. But by the time David jumped to his rave-up "Parapersona Crash," the walls started to shake and what little hesitation the audience may have had over dancing to a kiddy toy's "bleeps" and "bloops" vanished.

When not babbling about computer games, Tom Loftus produced interactives for MSNBC.com