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TRAVIS SCOTT SCORED WITH *FORTNITE*.
IS GAMING MUSIC'S NEXT BIG STAGE?

GETTING IN THE GAME



Scott photographed by Nabil Elderkin on July 11 at Milk Studios in Los Angeles.

Styling by Alexandra and Mackenzie Grandquist
Nike hoodie, Sacai jacket, Bottega Veneta belt, KAPITAL jeans.



An otherworldly Scott in his *Fortnite* "Astronomical" event in April.

With his record-setting (and eye-popping) performance in *Fortnite*, **Travis Scott** proved that limitless creative potential — and a captive, merch-mad audience — could make video games the most lucrative new frontier for the live-music business

BY TATIANA CIRISANO

SOMEBODY FUCKING SMOKED ME?!" It's the evening of April 23, and Travis Scott is addressing roughly 230,000 viewers over Instagram Live. He's about to perform the biggest concert of his career — maybe the biggest concert of anyone's.

The 28-year-old rapper is streaming from home in Los Angeles while tuning in through his gaming console to the premiere of "Astronomical" — his pre-taped performance as an avatar within the massively popular multiplayer video game *Fortnite Battle Royale*, in which groups of 100 players battle on a deserted island until only one of them remains. That means he gets to join the fun as a player, and unfortunately, sometimes lose (or in gamer-speak, get smoked). "I'll let y'all know when I respawn" (come back to life), he says with a chuckle. Moments later he's back in the game, fumbling with his joystick and gulping shots of Don Julio 1942. "Turn that shit up!" he barks to someone offscreen, and the volume jumps.

Back in the game, players have parachuted down from a flying bus (just go with it) to cluster around a virtual stage, where their avatars head-bang and pump flaming mic stands in the air. Suddenly, the balmy opening bars of Scott's signature hit, "Sicko Mode,"

hail the arrival of a colossal purple asteroid that crashes into the stage, sending players flying with the force of its explosion. Out of it rises an equally colossal avatar of Scott — silver chain, maze of tattoos, custom Air Jordans and all — stomping over palm trees as if they were weeds and igniting sparkly meteor showers with a thunderous clap of his hands. As avatar Scott mouths the words to a greatest-hits collection of his songs from "Goosebumps" to "Highest in the Room," the spectacle whisks players through a flaming amusement park, underwater and finally, into outer space, where Scott debuts "The Scotts," his brand-new track with Kid Cudi, while riding a glowing planet into oblivion.

The entire performance lasted under 10 minutes, but by the end, it had made history as *Fortnite*'s largest-ever in-game gathering. The initial event drew 12.3 million concurrent players at its peak, and a staggering 27.7 million unique players from around the globe joined across five total airings of "Astronomical," over the course of three days and multiple time zones. Including repeat viewers, fans showed up for the event a total of 45.8 million times — and that may not count another 73 million views logged by

HAIR BRANDING BY YOUNG & RUBICAM; MAKEUP BY AMBER ANSOL; THE ONLY AGENCY BARBERING BY MICHIGAN/CHI; FORTNITE: COURTESY OF EPIGAMES

the official YouTube version, and millions more on gaming-focused livestreaming platform Twitch, where Nielsen SuperData estimates the premiere's official stream reached a peak average-minute audience of 2.3 million viewers. (Twitch does not release exact viewer numbers.)

No other artist could have been better positioned to put on a virtual event this mind-blowing. Scott is renowned for pushing creative boundaries — from announcing his blockbuster 2018 album, *Astroworld*, by constructing enormous, gold-colored sculptures of his own head across the country, to riding an actual roller coaster high over his fans' heads inside arenas during the album's tour. When even that wasn't enough to satisfy his free-wheeling imagination, the virtual world became his new obsession.

"I could go from being myself to underwater, the stage could go underwater without anybody getting hurt — all of the things I would want to do in real life," Scott tells *Billboard*. "We can fly; we can do all of these things. That's what gets me amped, you know what I'm saying? The fantasies I would think of, to see it all come alive, so people can see and experience it, too."

Scott isn't the only creator eyeing video games as a new, interactive — and massive — stage. Before "Astronomical," electronic DJ Marshmello performed a first-of-its-kind live set inside *Fortnite* in February 2019 (attracting 10.7 million concurrent players, a record that "Astronomical" beat by 1.6 million). Less elaborate live sets have followed, from artists like Diplo, Steve Aoki and deadmau5 inside *Fortnite*'s new, weapons-free Party Royale mode. And outside of *Fortnite*, over the past few months, artists have performed inside games from *Minecraft* (Charli XCX, 100 gees, Phoebe Bridgers and more) to action game *World of Tanks* (The Offspring) and even a spinoff of Disney's *Club Penguin* (Soccer Mommy).

And while the lack of live concerts during the coronavirus pandemic no doubt aided Scott's (truly) astronomical numbers, in-game shows existed for years before the current crisis, and will only continue to blow up in the future. In fact, many music industry executives and analysts consider "Astronomical" to be further confirmation of a shift they've seen coming, one as inevitable and potentially explosive



as Scott's asteroid: that games — which offer a built-in, enormous, youthful audience eager to pony up real cash for virtual merchandise — are the future of the live-music business.

"Games are the new venues of tomorrow," says MIDiA Research co-founder/tech and music analyst Mark Mulligan. "Each one is a different venue, the same way you choose between which stadium, theater or arena to play. Travis Scott performing in *Fortnite* was the gaming equivalent of having a stadium-sized setup, with amazing lighting and backdrops, and everything else."

In-game concerts eliminate the barriers and expense of physical shows, while retaining the same community aspect that makes them so special. There are "zero limitations from a production and capacity standpoint," says David Stromberg, Scott's manager and GM of his record label/merchandise company Cactus Jack. A near-limitless number of fans from around the world can tune in simultaneously, including many, adds Stromberg, "that may have never been to a concert." Overhead costs are typically minimal compared with physical shows, and the financial potential is huge.

Thanks in no small part to the gaming community's normalized practice of purchasing in-game items like avatar skins and gear — one that Scott profited from immensely thanks to an extensive "Astronomical" line — the global video game sales market is expected to generate revenue of \$159.3 billion in 2020, a year-on-year growth spurt of 9.3%, according to esports analytics firm Newzoo. That's almost eight times the \$20.2 billion

that the global recorded-music industry generated in 2019, according to IFPI.

So enticing is the gaming industry's growth that in early July, PlayStation maker Sony Corp. — the parent of Sony Music Group, home to Epic Records, where Scott is signed — took a 1.4% minority stake in *Fortnite* publisher Epic Games for \$250 million (valuing Epic at just shy of \$18 billion), joining Chinese tech/music firm Tencent Holdings, which acquired 40% of Epic Games for \$330 million in 2012. Projects to come out of the deal will build on the existing "One Sony" campaign, which encourages collaborations across the company's portfolio, focusing "mainly in the area of Sony's entertainment business," says a Sony Corp. representative, with the opportunity to provide "new value creation in areas such as virtual platforms for live content."

Meanwhile, online job postings show that Sony Music is hiring its own team of game developers, and Epic Records is partnering with professional esports organization FaZe Clan to create a soundtrack to the upcoming film *The FaZe Clan Universe*, among a growing list of other music industry players making moves in the gaming space. And if an artist as forward-thinking and influential as Scott has given the in-game performance his seal of approval, it's a sign that those companies are on the right track.

"Whether it was the gaming community or people that don't even play games, there was definitely a sense of, 'People around the world right now are locked in and focused,'" Scott says of his performance. "I watched it, and I raged out till I passed out."



ASTRONOMICAL" LASTED just 10 minutes, but the event took over a year to come together, and the idea behind it had been brewing in Scott's imagination for much longer. "I've been having these ideas since *Rodeo* [his 2015 debut album]," says Scott, speaking over the phone from Los Angeles. "I'm just now being able to get it going."

The Houston native grew up playing video games in the *God of War* and *Grand Theft Auto* series and has been a committed gamer ever since; he started playing *Fortnite* when the game was released in 2017. The following year, Drake made headlines for participating in a *Fortnite* session with professional gamer Tyler "Ninja" Blevins, which drew a record-breaking peak 628,000 concurrent viewers when it was broadcast on Twitch. Scott, who was then five months away from releasing *Astroworld* and catapulting to superstardom, played in that session, too.

"I think people gravitate toward the experience," he says of *Fortnite*'s popularity. "There are multiple things you can do; you can have these different [out]fits; you can shoot. It's a different combination of things, which is why I think people fuck with it."

Fortnite is free to play, although gamers can purchase "V-bucks" to exchange for virtual goods like skins (avatar outfits), gear (for fighting) and emotes (which lend the ability to act out expressions, including

Opposite page, from left: Marshmello kicked off *Fortnite*'s star in-game performances in February 2019; virtual outfits created for Scott's "Astronomical" event; Diplo's Major Lazer performed in Party Royale mode in May. Right: real-life Diplo (right, with guest Young Thug) behind the scenes of his Party Royale set promoting his *Thomas Wesley* album in June.

dance moves). It's available on various consoles, as well as computers and mobile devices, and users on one platform can play with those on others, a rarity in gaming. All of these factors have helped *Fortnite* accumulate 350 million registered users globally in just three years, making it one of the most popular games ever.

"We reached out to Epic Games over a year ago about doing a collaboration," says Stromberg. (Epic Games declined to comment for this story.) Scott immediately had a vision for what his in-game performance could look like, but it took some time for the technology to catch up to it. "I was like, 'Yo, if we just stay down and figure this out, it's going to come together,'" recalls Scott. "I commend those guys for pushing and pushing to try to make the idea that I had come to life." The performance's high-gloss production quality comes courtesy of Epic Games' pioneering development tool Unreal Engine, which has powered the *Mortal Kombat* series, *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds* and even the digitally rendered sets for the Disney+ *Star Wars* TV series *The Mandalorian*.

Neither Epic division — Games nor Records — would disclose the terms of their



screened over the crowd.

Bringing those ideas to life required meticulous behind-the-scenes planning. As with any streamed music, in-game performances like Scott's require the proper music licenses, which can cost upwards of \$100,000 for a single song — a license to use a recording (usually from a label) as well as a public performance license from a collecting society like ASCAP or BMI. Any video of the performance that's available on-demand afterward

(such as on Twitch) also requires a synch license and a mechanical license, the latter of which might also be required for a live performance. DJ sets that include remixes or samples also require licenses to sample or interpolate songs.

Scott's performance only used music from his own catalog. While some artists' contracts stipulate that they will only play music they have written or co-written to keep licensing costs low, Seven20 co-founder/CEO Dean Wilson, who manages deadmau5 (a performer at the live Party Royale premiere on May 8), says, "We give [Epic Games] a setlist, tell them who owns what recordings and who owns the publishing, and then it's up to them to clear."

From there, promoting an in-game concert often means doing the opposite of what one would do for a physical show. "On the concert side, you have to announce 90 days out to consider the fact that people have to take off work

or get a babysitter," says TMWRK co-founder Andrew McInnes, who helped put together longtime management client Diplo's Party Royale residency. "We are 15 years into that being drilled into our heads, and that is not a concept that applies to gaming." Instead, *Fortnite* performances draw the most attention when they're announced mere days before the event — in Scott's case, three. And while live shows can last hours, the most effective in-game performances assume that attendees have a much shorter attention span — especially in *Fortnite*, which shut down the entire game during Scott's and Marshmello's performances.

"If you shut a game down for an hour, I can't imagine the amount of backlash that you would get," says Marshmello's manager, Shalizi Group CEO Moe Shalizi, "versus just doing a quick concert that's 10 minutes. It was a snack — something to keep people engaged, to have fun with, and then back to [gaming] they go."

All of that adds up to performances that are far more cost-effective than traditional ones. While Cactus Jack would not comment on the budget for "Astronomical," Wilson notes that such events are "nowhere near as expensive as going on a 50-day tour that costs you \$8 million to \$10 million." And while many tours depend on selling out venues in order to make a profit, "virtually, it doesn't matter."

So far, the lucrative part of in-game performances isn't ticket sales but virtual merch. For years that has been a central revenue stream for the music business in Asia, where Tencent Music Entertainment, which owns three major streaming services in China, makes around 70% of its revenue from virtual tipping and virtual gifts bought by fans. And while those businesses have been slower to take off in the West, gaming offers a promising avenue for them.

For "Astronomical," *Fortnite* pulled out all the stops, adding Scott to its Icon Series of "cosmetics" celebrating influential gamers, with two skins for sale: a replica of Scott's performance avatar (for the equivalent of about \$15) and an astronaut version (\$20). Players could also purchase a Diamond Jack harvesting tool (\$8), a Goosebumps wrap (essentially a skin for weapons, \$5), a Head Banger emote (\$3) or various bundles of those items. *Fortnite* does not release virtual merch

NEXT LEVEL

HOW THE MUSIC AND GAMING INDUSTRIES BECAME FRIENDS WITH BENEFITS

BY JOSH GLICKSMAN

1978

Taito's *Space Invaders*, with its simple *bum-bum-bum-bum* bassline, becomes the first video game to feature a continuous backing soundtrack.



1981

Konami's *Frogger* breaks from the linear music mold, adding game-over and level-start themes, and employing 11 tracks that often change throughout gameplay.



1983

In Midway's arcade game *Journey*, the user must retrieve the band's instruments from different planets, then act as bouncer at a concert, during which "Separate Ways (Worlds Apart)" plays. The song peaks at No. 8 on the Hot 100 the month of its release.

1985

Nintendo's *Super Mario Bros.* arrives with an iconic theme song by Koji Kondo. It will spend over 100 consecutive weeks on *Billboard*'s now-defunct Hot Ringtones chart and spawn countless remixes.



1987

The first installment of *Final Fantasy* has a soundtrack by Japanese composer Nobuo Uematsu, who'll go on to sell out concert halls around the globe.

1990

The King of Pop comes to Sega Genesis: *Michael Jackson's Moonwalker* finds the singer fighting villains to rescue kidnapped children, all while dancing to hits like "Beat It," "Smooth Criminal" and "Bad."

1996

Nine Inch Nails co-founders — and future Academy Award winners — Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross score the first-person shooter game *Quake* (and Reznor voices the protagonist).



October 1997

Grand Theft Auto debuts with a key innovation: seven radio stations (playing music created in-house) that gamers can toggle between. That number's now up to 20 for the most recent installment in 2013, with channels hosted by Frank Ocean and Flying Lotus.

sales figures, and Scott's team declined to disclose their share of the revenue, but the numbers speak for themselves: Even if the least expensive skin was the only item for sale, at a 3% engagement rate across all five airings, sales would add up to a gross of over \$12.5 million — so at a traditional 20% revenue share, Scott would rake in \$2.5 million from virtual merch alone.

To boost demand, *Fortnite* often releases limited numbers of cosmetics, which can be rereleased later to hype related events. For Diplo's June 25 Party Royale set celebrating the release of his country album, *Diplo Presents Thomas Wesley, Chapter 1: Snake Oil*, *Fortnite* brought back a retired set of Western-themed skins. "They were like, 'It will probably bring people into Party Royale that maybe wouldn't have come in the first place, because of this throwback skin,'" says TMWRK executive vp Renee Brodeur. "Epic [Games] knows exactly what works for their user base."

Meanwhile, the branding around "Astronomical" extended right down to the Scott avatar's shoes, from the artist's long-running collaboration with Nike and Air Jordan. A report from Nielsen Esports estimates that the top five YouTube videos related to the event generated a brand exposure value for Nike of at least \$518,000 (meaning that Nike would have had to spend that amount on 30-second ad placements to have the same effect).

Back on Earth, Scott — who, an industry source estimates, sells upwards of half a million dollars in physical merch per arena tour stop — released multiple limited-edition collections of Cactus Jack x *Fortnite* merch priced in the \$40-\$95 range, including gamer-themed clothing items, gaming accessories, a Scott action figure and even a branded NERF Elite Dart Blaster. "Things that I love, things that I want," says Scott. "It's just the kid in me." The merch also included a set of physical media for "The Scotts," including a CD, cassette, 12-inch picture disc, 7-inch vinyl and 12-inch vinyl, with cover art by the graffiti artist/designer KAWS. Every item sold out.

"Our goal with the merchandising aspect was to create synergy between the digital and real world," says Stromberg. "In-game downloads were based on Travis' iconic branding, and our *Fortnite* merch collection was inspired by tour



From top: Charli XCX's set at *Minecraft*'s Square Garden festival in April; the Rave Mom Warehouse created within the Rave Family Block Fest in *Minecraft* planned for July (but ultimately postponed). Opposite page: Fans showed their love for Soccer Mommy during her *Club Penguin*: Rewritten show in April.

merch, allowing fans to bring home collectibles from a virtual universe."

In-game performances are most successful, though, when the artist has an authentic connection to the gaming community. "The best way of all to make these things work is when the artist actually enjoys playing the game, too," says Mulligan. "They're going to know what sort of clothes they should be wearing; what tools they should be carrying; all those sorts of things that will make it click that much more with the audience."

As a *Fortnite* player himself, Scott says he understood how to cater to the gamer experience and thought of "Astronomical" as a new level or season. "When I play a game, the next level always gets me, like, 'Oh, man, what's about to happen?'" he says. "I think it's just being able to supply people with the frequency that they're on. Knowing not to mess up, for all the people who love this — their everyday, natural love of the experience."

So "Astronomical" intentionally included free, new player experiences that aren't possible in the regular gaming mode, like the abilities to fly and swim underwater, for the duration of the performance. Those details helped create scarcity, an element crucial to the live-events industry that is difficult to replicate virtually: Fans purchase concert tickets to participate in a singular, shared moment in time that won't happen again — and to create similar "FOMO" within games, artists must offer players something both new and fleeting.

"I don't think Travis could have done anything different," says pro gamer Blevins, who plays with Scott often. "At one point you walk out of the water, at another point you're falling through gravity during a drop and then floating through space — so many different things that you



"Games are the new venues of tomorrow. Travis Scott performing in *Fortnite* was the gaming equivalent of having a stadium-sized setup."

—MARK MULLIGAN, MÏDIA RESEARCH

can't do in the actual game."

That helps drive listening spikes for an artist's music. Marshmello saw massive streaming and sales gains on the day of his *Fortnite* set, including a nearly 24,000% increase in on-demand video streams of his song "Check This Out," according to Nielsen Music/MRC Data. Marshmello's *Fortnite Extended Set (DJ Mix)* is the top performing DJ mix of all-time on Apple Music and debuted at No. 1 on *Billboard*'s Top Dance/Electronic Albums chart, where it reigned for 16 weeks.

"The Scotts" broke Spotify's 2020 record for the most streamed track on the first day of its release, with 7.45 million streams. The final proof of concept for

"Astronomical" arrived just over a week after the event premiere, when the song debuted at No. 1 on the *Billboard* Hot 100. "I just really care about the fans and cater to what we want," says Scott. "Because I'm also just a fan."

ASTRONOMICAL" MAY HAVE been some viewers' introduction to the alchemy of music and gaming partnerships, but the industries have been on a collision course for two decades — and Steve Schnur, the worldwide executive/president of music for Elec-

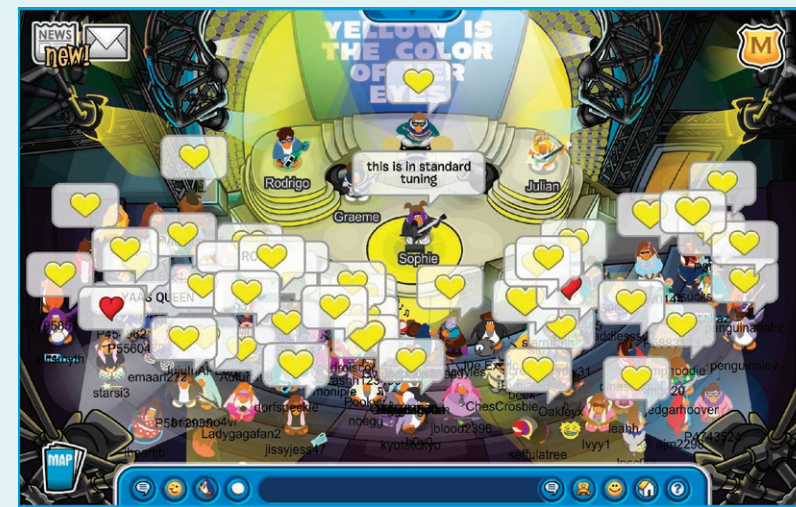
tronic Arts (which publishes titles like *The Sims*, *FIFA* and *Madden NFL*) has seen it all.

Schnur left his career in the recording industry, where he held executive roles at labels including Elektra and Arista, to join EA in 2001. At the time, video games were moving from a cartridge format to CD-ROM, which had enough storage for more sophisticated audio than the chip-tune beats of *Pac-Man* and *Donkey Kong*. Even so, "the record business and publishing business didn't really understand the game business," recalls Schnur. "I think they looked at it as no more than toys."

Artists, on the other hand, "have gotten it from day one," says Schnur, partly because so many are gamers themselves. One of the first calls he received after joining EA came from Snoop Dogg, who pitched Schnur the song "Get Live," which the rapper wrote specifically for the *NBA Live* series. And some of music's most progressive icons saw even bigger opportunities early on: David Bowie scored the action game *Omikron*, *The Nomad Soul* in 1999, and five years later, Nile Rodgers produced the critically acclaimed soundtrack to *HALO 2*, the first video game soundtrack to enter the *Billboard* 200. Meanwhile, since joining EA, Schnur has placed music from notoriously hard-to-license acts like Radiohead and Jack White in games like *FIFA* and *Battlefield 1*.

The same year Schnur joined EA, Rockstar Games' *Grand Theft Auto III* popularized in-game radio stations, with music from buzzy hip-hop artists like Royce Da 5'9" and Black Rob. Rockstar — where many top executives have a music industry background — has since turned the game into a hub for music discovery. A 2018 update to *Grand Theft Auto Online*, *After Hours*, allowed players to run a virtual nightclub and integrated underground DJs like The Blessed Madonna and Solomun as characters essential to the narrative. The company hosted a real-life club night inside a motion capture studio in Long Island, N.Y., to capture their sets, where everyone — from the DJs and their entourages to the attendees and barbacks — partied while wearing motion-capture suits to log their movements.

The last time a game received a *Fortnite*-level of music industry hype was circa 2006, when a *Billboard* headline at the



time declared "The Year of the Avatar." The game: *Second Life*, a multiplayer online universe owned by Linden Lab (which still exists today), where users socialize, shop, trade in-game property and participate in a virtual economy dependent upon real money. The music industry was quick to pounce on *Second Life*'s popularity, creating branded destinations, merch stores, recording facilities and — yes — live concerts inside it. Users could purchase virtual band shirts at the Sony Music Media Island store; OutKast and Justin Timberlake invited fans to stream music at their in-game artist lounges; Chamillionaire conducted a virtual meet-and-greet; and Warner Records (then Warner Bros. Records) constructed brownstone lofts where Talib Kweli and Regina Spektor held virtual listening parties. That year, Suzanne Vega and Duran Duran, respectively, became the first two major recording acts to perform live concerts inside *Second Life*, which at the time had around 400,000 members.

In the tech world, *Second Life* reignited excitement about the idea of a "Metaverse" (central to sci-fi author Neal Stephenson's 1992 book, *Snow Crash*) — a shared, 3D virtual space where humans will be able to interact as avatars. Adam Arrigo, a tech veteran and founder of the music performance livestreaming platform Wave, has spent much of his career trying to pinpoint when and how the Metaverse will emerge. "We thought it would start in virtual reality," he says. "But I think we've seen over the last few years that the Metaverse is really being born in gaming."

Founded in 2016 as a virtual reality startup for concerts, dependent on the adoption of VR headsets, Wave has since

pivoted to helping artists like John Legend and Tinashe perform live online sets as avatar versions of themselves inside virtual worlds of their own design. Now — with investors including manager Scooter Braun, Superfly co-founder Rick Farman and Twitch co-founder Kevin Lin — Arrigo says the company is securing partnerships to bring those avatars into games, too. "Culture is built around games, and they've become the social spaces of the future," he says. "No longer is it a singular escapist medium, where you're just consuming content. Especially post-coronavirus, you can see the true power of these games as social spaces."

Nowhere is that more apparent today than in *Fortnite*. A June 2019 report from the entertainment/technology insights firm National Research Group estimates that among its audience of teens (ages 10-17) who play at least once a week, *Fortnite* consumes 25% of their free time. The amount of time those teens spent on *Fortnite* grew faster year over year than that spent on YouTube, Netflix or Facebook, "and audiences cite its social elements as the primary motivators for playing," the report reads, with players agreeing that "it's the best place to be my authentic self and to connect to what everyone is talking about, making me feel like I'm not alone." With the introduction of Party Royale — where the point isn't gaming so much as socializing through entertainment — *Fortnite* appears to be learning into this.

Now, Schnur says he's having discussions about ways to integrate music performances into EA games like *FIFA* and *Madden*, although he clarifies that "we're not going to do it just as a knee-jerk reac-

tion because Travis Scott did 10 minutes in *Fortnite*." Unlike *Fortnite*, he says many popular EA titles are only available on consoles and cost money, so to congregate tens of millions of fans at once would be challenging. But since the pandemic limits the options for real-life performance, the potential is hard to ignore.

"Could virtual festivals and events — think Coachella, Glastonbury or even Super Bowl week — with none of the logistical challenges and all of the cultural and economic benefits, be the next step?" asks Schnur. "EA thinks so."

DOJA CAT IS PERFORMING her bubbly Hot 100 No. 1 hit "Say So," but something sounds a little different about the chorus. "Didn't even notice the creeper in the forest," she sings, "I've got to stay on focus/I blew up, oh no."

The pop singer is a guest at a festival inside the Microsoft-owned video game *Minecraft*, where 126 million monthly active users build virtual worlds by mining a forest for wood blocks, keeping an eye out for hostile "creepers" who sneak up on players and then explode. The festival, called Nether Meant, took place April 11 inside a virtual replica of the Brooklyn music venue Elsewhere that festival organizers spent hours building.

It was just one of several *Minecraft* music festivals recently hosted by the volunteer-run virtual events firm Open Pit, which views the charming, 8-bit-style video game as a way to bring global audiences together during the pandemic and beyond. The festivals "fill a different space than live shows," says organizer Robin Boehlen. "There's still a barrier to entry, which is the cost of *Minecraft*, internet and having a computer. But [not] other barriers typically found in live shows, like age restrictions, geographical restrictions or even if you're just not comfortable attending a show for various reasons."

Performers send in prerecorded sets for each in-game festival, which takes 12 to 50 volunteers between a few hundred and a few thousand hours to build, depending on the size (the biggest events draw over 100,000 attendees). Users can purchase general-admission tickets or a VIP pass to unlock perks like exclusive viewing areas.



November 1997

The first rhythm game, *PaRappa the Rapper*, comes to North America with a title character who moves through six stages by rapping music composed by Masaya Matsuura.

May 1999

The Recording Academy introduces three new awards for the 2000 Grammys: best soundtrack album, best song and best instrumental composition for a motion picture, television or other visual media — including video games.

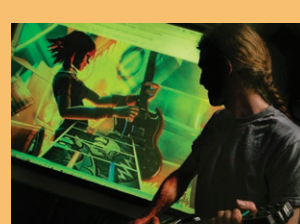


August 1999

The first installment of *Tony Hawk Pro Skater* arrives and becomes a touchstone for millennial music fans. Acts like Rage Against the Machine, Red Hot Chili Peppers and OutKast all surface on the franchise's soundtracks.

Early 2000s

A string of artist-focused video games — action game *50 Cent: Bulletproof*, Britney Spears' dance competition *Britney's Dance Beat*; a trio of Def Jam-branded wrestling games incorporating DJ Funkmaster Flex and then-label president Kevin Liles — debut, though none have huge success.



2005

Guitar Hero makes waves thanks to a guitar-shaped controller that adds to the player's interactive experience; specialized versions for Aerosmith and Metallica come down the line.



November 2009

Six years after its release, *Call of Duty* becomes the world's biggest first-person shooter franchise, and music star power follows: Hans Zimmer creates the theme for 2009's *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*, and barely a year later, Eminem's Plink-assisted "Won't Back Down" leads the trailer for *Call of Duty: Black Ops* and is buried as an Easter egg track in the popular Zombies mode.



October 2012

JAY-Z is executive producer and soundtrack curator for *NBA 2K*'s 2013 edition, released in the fall of 2012. His own tracks show up, along with cuts from collaborators like Kanye West and Coldplay.

November 2012

The fourth release in the *Halo* series becomes the highest-charting video game soundtrack in *Billboard* 200 history thanks to a No. 50 debut.

On the day of, users join the *Minecraft* event server to watch avatar versions of artists mime performances onstage, while streaming audio simultaneously in a separate window. Just two weeks after Nether Meant, Open Pit teamed with electronic duo 100 geecs to host another festival, Square Garden, which featured sets from Charli XCX and Benny Blanco, and raised over \$50,000 for Feeding America.

Organizers say that *Minecraft*'s open-world format makes it ideal for festivals, and their only real expense — aside from time — is renting enough server space, which costs between \$200 and \$300 per event. And while Open Pit performers play for free — the events raise money for charity, and Boehlen says it would be “difficult to pay fairly” anyway — other organizers hope to use *Minecraft* festivals to turn a profit. Tech industry veteran Jackie McGuire's Rave Family Block Fest had the ambitious plan to host over 900 artists across 65 stages within *Minecraft* July 9-13, but had sold roughly \$30,000 in tickets after a chaotic first two days, and the event was postponed indefinitely due to functionality issues.

Even so, the proliferation of *Minecraft* festivals shows there's potential for a wide range of artists — across genres and levels of popularity — to enter the gaming space way beyond *Fortnite*. “I hate gatekeeping — most music festivals are run by one of three companies, and they book all of the same people,” says McGuire, which is why Rave Family Block Fest booked more underground acts like German-Italian producer Sacha Robotti and rapper-producer UNiiQU3 alongside names like A-Trak and ZHU. And few would have expected late-'90s rock band American Football to perform at Nether Meant, but “even though they don't play *Minecraft*, they were very excited about the idea,” says organizer Umru Rothenberg. “Their kids played as them in the game. They were very responsive and interested in doing it.” Last year, Korn performed inside the fantasy game *AdventureQuest*, while The Offspring performed inside the military warfare game *World of Tanks*.

In April, indie artist Sophie Allison, aka Soccer Mommy, played her new album *Color Theory* as a penguin avatar of herself inside *Club Penguin: Rewritten*, a remake of the now-defunct online multiplayer game *Club Penguin*. After fans overloaded servers at the initial planned event, over



Avatar Scott inside his *Fortnite* “Astronomical” event on April 23.

10,000 people showed up virtually to the rescheduled date, and many stuck around afterward for a Q&A hosted through the game's chat feature. “It's a game that everyone remembers from being a kid,” says Allison, “and I feel like a lot of people were also doing the same thing I was doing: logging back on when we were all stuck inside, and playing a little bit, just for fun.” Her manager, Mac Cregan of Brilliant Corners, says the event drove social media spikes for Soccer Mommy: In the 20 days between the March 30 announcement and April 18 (two days after the event itself), her Twitter growth rate was 2.5 times that of the previous three months, and her Instagram growth was double that of the same time period.

Yet some of the biggest opportunities for in-game music partnerships still remain untapped. For the fourth quarter of 2019, according to MIDiA Research's Music Brand Tracker, which tracks which games artists' fans play, Travis Scott fans are 2.3 times more likely to play *Fortnite* than overall consumers; still, 80 other artist fan bases are more likely to play *Fortnite* than Scott's, including those of acts as different as Jessie Reyez and Kamasi Washington. In that sense, Epic Records chairman/CEO Sylvia Rhone saw opportunity for Scott: *Fortnite* “exposed him to new audiences globally,” she says, and as a result his fan base “expanded to include the entire family demographic.” Meanwhile, the fan bases for Jorja Smith, Skepta and Gunna are among the top 10 most likely to play *Call of Duty*; those of J Balvin, Slowthai and Koffee are within the top 10 most likely to play *FIFA*.

As gamer Blevins explains, even music fans who aren't gamers might download a game — especially if it's free — in order to watch their favorite artist. “Name any band

that you would think somebody wouldn't download *Fortnite* for,” he says. “If they provide some sort of new, cool moment, song or announcement, and you're a die-hard fan of this band or artist, are you telling me that you're not going to download a free game and attend a concert live?”

S COTT — AS COMMITTED TO his vision as ever — insists that the avatar in “Astronomical” was actually him. “I was in the game. That was me,” he says, pausing dramatically before he bursts into laughter. “No, I'm telling you — it's this new thing I'm working on.”

Considering how fast gaming technology is advancing, his jokes may not be too far off. Mulligan and other analysts predict that in the not-so-distant future, game publishers — and potentially music companies — will simply create their own entirely virtual music artists. Already, the avatar influencer Lil Miquela, a creation of the media studio Brud, has accumulated 2.5 million Instagram followers and released a string of singles — the most popular of which, “Sims (Miquela Remix)” (a remix of pop singer Lauv's song about wanting to live in the game *The Sims*) has over 42.8 million streams on Spotify. And in January 2019, Epic Games acquired 3Later, an avatar developer known for its hyper-realistic creations of humans.

“It's not beyond the realm of possibility that Epic Games will get to the stage of saying, ‘Why do we need the real deal anymore? Let's just go and create our own set of virtual characters,’” says Mulligan. “We've always had these conversations about how long before machines replace humans. There's no reason at all

why Epic Games couldn't create a roster of *Fortnite* artists.”

Artists, too, might create new avatars as alter egos of themselves, to test out new concepts — the next iteration of a DJ performing under a different name. And in a keynote speech at the video game D.I.C.E. Summit in Las Vegas in February, Epic Games CEO Tim Sweeney said that “where this is ultimately headed is games becoming more open platforms for creators to build their own stuff... in the future, we'd like for any musician to hold their concert of that sort without having to coordinate with us.”

Before gaming can reach that level though, today's in-game performances face challenges of their own. Most important, they're not yet scalable: “It takes months, not just to prepare and get the motion-capture and visuals all done, but to actually build in some genuinely unique gameplay and gaming characteristics,” says Mulligan. And even if gaming companies manage to slash production time, how will performers keep things fresh? “I fully expect Epic Games to have full shows like that more regularly into the future,” he adds, “but they may become less and less unique.”

For the moment, Scott's team doesn't seem fazed. “We are already working on building out something even bigger,” says Stromberg. “The music business clearly took notice of our work and is looking to create more opportunities for artists in gaming. We will definitely be at the forefront of navigating the industry's future in the [gaming] space.”

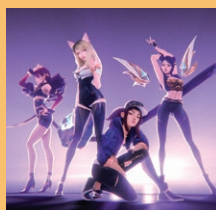
And while Scott agrees that virtual performances will never replace the thrill of a live show (“It's not like that; I miss that so, so much”), the point is to do things that aren't possible in the real world. He's already dreaming up his next virtual adventure.

“I'd do it again for sure,” he says. “That was just level one.”

HEAD TO BILLBOARD PRO to read more about the intersection of music and gaming in our latest Deep Dive: “Gaming: Music's Next Big Play,” with stories on the industry's investment in FaZe Clan, why artists are migrating to Twitch, Nashville's rise as a center for recording gaming scores, key synch players, and Nielsen and MRC Data analyses of music fans' gaming habits.

December 2012

Composer **Austin Wintory** gets a Grammy nom in the best score soundtrack for visual media category for his work on 2012 indie adventure game *Journey* — the first time a video game soundtrack is recognized at the ceremony.



November 2018

League of Legends virtual pop group **K/DA** — which comprises Madison Beer, Jaira Burns and (G)I-dle members Miyeon and Soyeon — reaches No. 1 on *Billboard*'s World Digital Song Sales chart with “POP/STARS.”



January 2019

The long-awaited *Kingdom Hearts III* — part of a beloved Disney-Square Enix collaborative series — boasts an opening theme by pop singer-songwriter **Hikaru Utada**. The Skrillex-assisted track “Face My Fears” breaks into the Hot 100.

February 2019

Marshmello headlines the first in-game concert for *Fortnite*, and nearly 11 million users tune in, with millions more following on Twitch and watching the YouTube recap. The game goes on to host other huge acts like Diplo and Travis Scott, the latter of whom breaks Marshmello's live-audience record.