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Monday, June 27, 2005

MTV2 goes Video Mod mad

For a second season, game characters will rock out on the music network's machinima-music-video show, *Video Mods*. Executive producer Alex Coletti takes us backstage.



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Last year, UPN debuted the computer-animated sitcom *Game Over*, which portrayed game characters' suburban home life. Despite some critical kudos, audiences didn't accept that characters that risked life and limb in-game were just another squabbling family once the console was switched off. The show was canceled after only a few airings.

However, gamers seemed much more willing to accept the fact that their game alter egos led a double life as rock stars. Tomorrow night at 8pm EDT/PDT, the second season of **Video Mods** will debut on MTV2. The show's concept seems tailor-made to woo 18- to 35-year-olds--and the valuable advertising dollars that go with them. Take the latest chart-topping songs, then create "video mods"--new, all-CG music videos using characters from popular games in lieu of decked-out rockers and oiled-down models.

The concept was tested in *Video Mods*' first season, which saw Majesco's BloodRayne belt out "Everybody's Fool" by Evanescence and VU Games' Leisure Suit Larry perform the Black Eyed Peas' "Shut Up," and the Vines' "Ride." Characters from another VU Game title, Tribes: Vengeance, rocked on an outdoor stage as the game's jet-powered mechwarriors streaked overhead, while characters from EA's The Sims 2 mimicked the Fountains of Wayne's "Stacey's Mom" video as the original played alongside it.

The concept behind the show proved popular--or popular enough at least to warrant a renewal and a lineup of beefier talent. The Beastie Boys, Breaking Benjamin, Taking Back Sunday, Yellowcard, and the ubiquitous Killers will star in video mods, using assets from games like EA's NBA Street V3 and Medal of Honor 3: European Assault, Konami's Silent Hill and Dance Dance Revolution, NCsoft's Lineage II, and Valve's Half-Life 2.

The debut episode of *Mods*' second season will see Franz Ferdinand's "Take Me Out" performed by the Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith III game's virtual cast. Also onboard are the vampire cowboys of Capcom's Darkwatch for Good Charlotte's "Predictable" and Konami's Death, Jr. for My Chemical Romance's "I'm Not Okay (I Promise)."

But is *Video Mods* just another gimmick to get the young gamers that advertisers covet to tune in? Or is it on the cutting edge of not one, but two dynamic art forms? With film production costs rising, could video mods someday replace traditional music videos? And who cooked up this crazy idea anyway? GameSpot caught up with Alex Coletti, *Video Mods*' executive

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producer, to take a look behind the scenes.

GameSpot: So first of all, how did the idea for this project come about?

Alex Coletti: Tony Shiff is a guy I worked with years ago. He had a show called *Review* that he brought to MTV and we did about a season's worth of that. At the time, he was working at Palomar Pictures, and it was kind of a music performance-based show--storytelling and music and graphics. That was like maybe '96 or '97, but we kept in touch over the years. He'd pop in when he was in New York, and he'd ask questions like, "How do I get in touch with 'NSYNC if I want to animate them, or make a computer game with them?" I didn't really know what he was getting at. And then one day, he shows up in my office with a laptop and says, "Okay, I've got it." And he plays me a video mod. And it was BloodRayne, the game, cut to a System of a Down song, and it blew me away. I called Dave Cohn, the Head of MTV2. We brought the laptop down, showed him, and we said, "Okay, let's do this."

GS: So it was just a matter of Tony Shiff showing up?

AC: The way Tony pitched it to me was, "Imagine video game characters are real. Being in the game is their day job--but at night they have a band." I was like, "Got it." So, Tony came here and then we quickly started developing what became the show *Video Mods*. [The next step] was reaching out to publishers and getting them to allow us to manipulate their very expensive IPs. Luckily people like EA and Majesco came to the table, and now everyone seems to be coming to the party.

GS: So what's the financial end of things? Are you paying them or are they paying you?

AC: We basically have to license both the game and the song. So, we, you know, it's one of these things where we don't own either one. We're going to the bands, and saying, "Hey, would you be hooked up with this game?" Then we're going to the publishers and saying, "What do you think about this treatment?" So it's getting everyone on the same page. It's a lot of work but, you know, that's kind of how it goes.

GS: Have any bands lobbied to be with a certain game?

AC: The Beastie Boys are coming up in the next episode, episode 2, because they're actually characters in NBA Street [V3]. So that made a lot of sense to use their characters. But other than that, not really. But with the soundtracks attached to games, I hope to come upon more situations where the game and the song are already kind of a package deal.

GS: Well there's the 50 Cent game coming out where his voice and likeness are already *in* the game...

AC: We're talking to them now about actually doing a video mod of 50, so yeah. There's times where it makes sense. Snoop [Dogg] is in a game [Midway's *Fear and Respect*], and things like that. Plus, just sometimes games have kick-ass soundtracks, so we're just lifting a song from it, if it works. Other times, depending on the mod, we find a song that's not on the soundtrack but just makes more sense.

GS: Which is more important--the popularity of a song or the popularity of a game?

AC: Really, it's just what is the best creative [combination]. We'll brainstorm some games and what songs are going to go with them. If the game is out, we'll look at the game soundtrack. But a lot of times it's like, "yeah, those are okay, but wouldn't it be a great idea to use this other song, and then do this storyline?"

GS: So, what was the most popular mod during the first season of *Video Mods*?

AC: I don't know how to gauge that. You know, you can't break one out of a show and say that did better than the others. But I have to say, I thought Leisure Suit Larry was my personal favorite. We did it to the Black Eyed Peas' "Shut Up." He's just a great character, and watching him do his little song was hysterical. Also, Dusk and Dawn, which aren't game characters, they're actually in the Nvidia mascots who did Evanescence's "Bring Me to Life." That was just so real-looking, it was frightening. So those are kind of a couple of the favorites. And you know, we've got some great stuff coming up. [NOTE: Past mods are archived at the [Video Mods section of mtv2.com](#)].

GS: So, anyway, so just tell me about how you guys go about making a video mod. You said that at least the first step is brainstorming...

AC: Yeah, and a lot of times clearances. We're under a time constraint, so clearances become an issue. You know, if the game publisher isn't comfortable with us taking their assets, we have to pass on that game. I'd hate to say a lot of it is legal--there's a lot of licensing issues. They say, "Well, we don't want you to do that." We say, "Okay, so let's get a different game." We have a pipeline to feed. I need four or five of these a month for each episode. So we go through the list of our favorite games. Then we say, "Hey, this publisher's kind of cool with us, they have these three games, let's pick songs." So a lot of it is just getting permission. At the same time, getting a dialogue with the development team is key. We need to find out how a game was built. Was it built in Maya? How are the assets going to translate? Are we going to be able to manipulate these to the extent that we want? How rich are the characters? How many environments do we have? So that fuels the creative as well, because we're working with what they give us.

GS: Right, so you just get all the assets and you make the actual mods in-house...

AC: No, it's not in-house. **IBC Digital** in Buffalo is the production company I use, and Tony and I exec-produce it. So, we all work collectively, but basically their tech guys get on with the game tech guys, they work out all the bugs in the models, the peculiarities and particulars that need to kind of be addressed. Then we'll revise the creative. We'll say, "Hey you know what? These characters can't do what you thought you wanted them to do," or "There's a great cutscene in the game, why don't we use that," and you kind of revise your treatment based on what's available to you. Then we actually go and motion capture. We hire musicians, we have a choreographer, we have people to do the motion-capture sync. Then we capture that data, clean it up, and then you assign the characters to the data. Once you've kind of assigned the characters to the motion, it's just like looking at dailies. You start editing and you end up with a music video.

GS: What lessons did you learn from the first season of *Video Mods*?

AC: It's kind of like the evolution of music videos. The novelty of watching video game characters perform is fun, like in this next episode you'll see Yoda playing drums. But just like music videos, there's an evolution where the storyline gets more interesting. So the same way that music videos evolved, video mods will too. We'll need more work on the game footage, work on the gameplay, work on the cutscenes, work on the narrative. *Video Mods* are following that same path of storyline, story-driven, conflict resolution kind of thing, which makes them more interesting.

GS: Have you ever seen **Decisive Battles**, this show on the History Channel? They re-created entire battles with the engine from the game Rome: Total War.

AC: That's great.

GS: Do you ever see a point where bands will actually just make a video mod and not bother with another video?

AC: Well, the Beastie Boys mod is the first real collaboration. The guys

themselves did their own motion capture. So when you see the character moving, it's literally Adam [Horowitz aka King Ad-Rock] in the suit, you know, doing it. They're going to use it on a DVD. So, yeah, but at some point, you know, we're hoping with 50 [Cent], he might not do an actual video for one of those songs, it might just be the mod of him. You know, this was early talk, it could have changed, though. So there might come a point where stuff we're creating on the show might become "the" music video.

GS: Now, I know, I know MTV and your sister network, Spike TV, are kind of jumping onto the game wagon with both feet. Microsoft unveiled the Xbox 360 on MTV, and this year's SpikeTV Video Game Awards were a big event. However, a lot of people in the gaming community have regarded both events, for lack of a better term, as gimmicks. Do you ever worry that people are going to dismiss *Video Mods* as, "Oh, it's just MTV trying to grab the young gamer demographic?"

AC: You know what? I haven't heard any bad feedback, I think it's kind of cool to see, to see these things. You know, watching someone play a video game on TV may not be, if I have the choice of playing the game or watching someone else. But this is watching the game do something you *can't* do at home. And it's a creative endeavor. I think it's been pretty well-received based on feedback. You know, EA has got it on their message board. But yeah, of course, somebody's going to say they're trying to tap in--and they're right! We're trying to entertain that audience, and we think we're doing it pretty well.

GS: From a personal standpoint, which ways do you see the music industry and the game industry coming together in the future?

AC: Well, I mean, it's already there in a lot of ways. The fact that video games are breaking bands, to an extent, that was unheard of a few years ago. The repetition that kids play games and listen to soundtracks I think is pretty incredible. I just think it's only going to get more embedded. The gaming companies are probably the people to speak to that. But, it's certainly here to stay.

By **Tor Thorsen** -- [GameSpot](#)
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