“Cementing gaming’s role in music’s evolution, Steinberg has done pop culture a laudable service.”
– Nick Catucci, Rolling Stone

MUSIC GAMES ROCK
RHYTHM GAMING’S GREATEST HITS OF ALL TIME

By
SCOTT STEINBERG
Author of Get Rich Playing Games

Feat. Martin Mathers and Nadia Oxford

Foreword By
ALEX RIGOPULOS
Co-Creator, Guitar Hero and Rock Band
Praise for *Music Games Rock*

“Hits all the right notes—and some you don’t expect. A great account of the music game story so far!”

– Mike Snider, Entertainment Reporter, *USA Today*

“An exhaustive compendia. Chocked full of fascinating detail...”

– Alex Pham, Technology Reporter, *Los Angeles Times*

“It’ll make you want to celebrate by trashing a gaming unit the way Pete Townshend destroys a guitar.”

– Jason Pettigrew, Editor-in-Chief, *ALTERNATIVE PRESS*

“I’ve never seen such a well-collected reference... it serves an important role in letting readers consider all sides of the music and rhythm game debate.”

– Masaya Matsuura, Creator, *PaRappa the Rapper*

“A must read for the game-obsessed...”

– Jermaine Hall, Editor-in-Chief, *VIBE*
MUSIC GAMES ROCK
RHYTHM GAMING'S GREATEST HITS OF ALL TIME

SCOTT STEINBERG
DEDICATION

For K, Z and R, who always kept the show going while I was out on tour.

And to Keith Elam, Nathaniel Hale, David Francis, Eric Knipp, Bjorn Larsson, Erik Schrody, Josh Levetan, Kris Ramac, Paul Sciglano, Frenchie, Nolan Bushnell, Trip Hawkins and Todd Anthony Shaw—all around the world, it's the same old song.
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When I learned that Scott Steinberg was compiling a history of music games, I was thrilled, as this is a little-known story that ought to be told.

Way back when Eran Egozy and I started Harmonix, over 16 years ago, video games were actually the last thing on our minds. Rather, we were motivated by something quite different: We wanted to change the way that people experience music.

Why? Because music stirs people’s emotions on a bafflingly profound level. It affects us in ways both abstract and potent; it prods deep recesses of our minds that are inaccessible to any other art form. To borrow words from Confucius, “Music produces a kind of pleasure which human nature cannot do without.”

And so we wondered: How might interactive media be used to tamper with the relationship between people and music?

In particular, we were struck by the fact that the urge to make music is woven into every one of us. And yet very, very few of us are actually able to act on that innate desire. Most of us don’t have the time or talent or patience to endure the years of training and dedication that are the price of entry for musicianship. For most people, the path to having a joyful experience with a musical instrument is a prohibitively long one. This is the problem we set out to solve.

In the beginning, we weren’t making video games, we were making music creativity apps of various sorts, and for years, we failed to make any kind of meaningful headway. But then something happened to us: PaRappa the Rapper appeared in Japan. It wasn’t the first music game we’d ever seen, but it was the first one that had an emotional impact on us. I remember sitting in Harmonix’s conference room one night, playing PaRappa for the first time and having my “light bulb moment,” where for the first time I could see the potential of video games as a medium to amplify people’s connection to music. And shortly thereafter, Harmonix started making games.

That was in 1998. And for the subsequent five or six years, Harmonix made several music games, including the rhythm-action games Frequency and Amplitude as well as the Karaoke Revolution series of singing games. We were proud of these games, from a creative standpoint, and they were popular with the critics. But consumers didn’t show much interest, and Harmonix continued to struggle to get by. Then, in 2004, the one non-music game we’d ever developed, EyeToy: AntiGrav, sold about 3X better than any music game we’d made previously. This was a dark hour for Harmonix, and we seriously pondered whether our decade-long forays in interactive music had been pointless.

But then our next game was Guitar Hero …

Most people in the US had never really heard of “music games” before Guitar Hero appeared in 2005, after which it snowballed into the fastest new video game franchise to reach $1 billion in retail sales in the history of the business. This record was quickly broken by our next franchise, Rock Band, which came in 2007.

Of course, the spectacular expansion of the genre from 2006 through 2008 was followed by a comparably spectacular contraction of the genre from 2008 through 2010. This has led many pundits to pronounce that “music games are dead.” And indeed, if you equate the words “music game” with “rock performance simulation game,” this would seem to be an uncontroversial assertion, with current sales of such games being a fraction of what they were a couple years ago.

However, such glib pronouncements miss the bigger picture: “Music games” comprise a vastly more expansive domain than just rock performance simulation. Like music itself, music games will continue to mutate and evolve. Already, for example, dancing games such as Dance Central have emerged as a prominent new fixture in popular culture.

Needless to say, dancing games, too, may someday be supplanted by some new form of music gameplay, which will then be succeeded by another. Some of these new phases of the evolution of music games will shine under the bright lights of mainstream success, some will not. But what’s clear is that music games, broadly speaking, can never “die,” because they are rooted in the basic human appetites for music and for play, both of which are manifestly here to stay. Music games, like music, will be endlessly reinvented. I am eager to see the next chapters in this story unfold!

Alex Rigopulos
Co-Founder and CEO
Harmonix Music Systems, Inc.
For those about to virtually rock, we salute you. Still, that’s not only because you’re about to step onto a path that untold millions have walked (clad in red, blue suede and Adidas shell-toed shoes, natch) for over three decades before. No, it’s also because following a 46% year-over-year drop in 2009 sales of music games across the board—and Activision’s subsequent decision to temporarily bench the once-proud Guitar Hero series—some would argue that it’s time for the entire genre to take a final bow.

Granted, you and I know that it’s a ludicrous statement. Long before the Fab Four ever flirted with headlining blockbuster band simulations or Dance Central made legions of coordination-deprived high-tech enthusiasts get awkwardly footloose, each enjoyed a healthy romance with gaming fans—not to mention hit-making success—in other eras, concepts and formats. A more cost effective alternative to $60 retail amusements, let alone nosebleed $120 instrument bundles, free to play digital, mobile and online-enabled games like Tap Tap Revenge 4 and Slayer: Pinball Rocks also continue to steadily tear up the charts. Growing public enthusiasm for karaoke and dancing games appears to be singing a different tune as well, given the multiplatinum-selling success of Michael Jackson: The Experience, and both the original Just Dance and its equally well-received sequel. Nonetheless, given the currently plummeting performance of titles based around oversized plastic instruments, from a broader perspective, it does make one wonder whether the industry can really turn the beat around…

It’s a troubling sign when even collaborations between the field’s most critically-acclaimed games and the world’s biggest bands fail to achieve bestselling status. Or, for that matter, its best-reviewed, most ambitious and fulfilling digital diversions fail to even move the dial on most fans’ radars. But dig a bit deeper and the reasons for the category’s recent financial troubles quickly become evident.

Not only have global economic problems seen cash-strapped gaming enthusiasts pinching pennies more than ever. We’ve also seen software publishers—convinced of the industry’s ‘recession-proof’ nature—increasingly attempt to milk popular franchises for all they were worth. From Band Hero to DJ Hero, SingStar: Queen and Lips: Number One Hits to Guitar Hero: Van Halen and Green Day: Rock Band, each incongruously not only played to an increasingly limited subset of fans, but also required the use of expensive plastic instruments that often ran upwards of $100.

With shoppers choosier about where they spend their money nowadays, and a willingness to buy only so many pricey accessories compatible with a small range of titles, one might argue that a sales decline was inevitable. Ditto for a correspondingly massive market correction, considering the price of the average music and rhythm game genre offering (with associated peripherals) more than doubled that of the average video game in recent years. Never mind that fans can stomach only so many faux Stratocasters crowding up the living room; even older music titles, many armed with built-in online music download services that allow players to constantly purchase new tunes that keep them feeling fresh and new, still offer tremendous value. Coupled with the rise of free-to-play alternatives for web browsers, smartphones and PCs, new on-demand digital download platforms and a target audience that, while growing, isn’t necessarily exhibiting a dire need for polystyrene turntable controllers… well, is it really a surprise that so many promising launches have ended up hitting a sour note?

While it’s tempting to be cynical though, the truth is that just as lawmakers, politicians and parents attempted to dismiss rock’n’roll as destined for failure as the devil’s music so long ago, none should be so quick to write the music gaming industry off just yet. As we’ve seen proven time and time again, music doesn’t just touch every human being on the planet’s lives. It’s also a common unifier that transcends age, gender, ethnicity, religion and culture. Music-based games, even since their infancy, have tended to be highly social or party game experiences, known for bringing people of seemingly disparate interests and backgrounds together. In addition, via their twin promise of multiplayer social interaction and rock star wish fulfillment, they’ve quickly grown to become the new karaoke or happy hour activity of choice for an entire generation of Lil’Wayne- and Lady Gaga-entranced listeners.
From a retail standpoint, high-profile outings like *Rock Band 3* and *Def Jam: Rapstar* may face an uphill battle. However, each new day brings heightened acceptance and growth for the field, whether through the endorsement of the world’s most acclaimed musicians or legions of additional fans’ being introduced to these titles. Despite sales floundering for certain retail products then, things are still continuing to snowball.

We’ve watched games like *Madden NFL* provide bands with more spins, and better opportunities to break out into mainstream success, than radio stations. We’re increasingly seeing the globe’s largest record labels starting to feel threatened by the rise of music games, which offer audiophiles additional options to interact with and enjoy favorite tracks. We’ve just begun to witness the rise of groundbreaking virtual distribution services such as Rock Band Network, which allow independent and unsigned bands the chance to be discovered by millions overnight without the need for a label’s input. We’re even reaching a crucial cultural tipping point, where the greatest acts of yesteryear and today are increasingly embracing music games as a way to bridge the gap between generations.

All things considered then, critics shouldn’t be so hasty to dismiss the concept of screeching or strumming away to your favorite chart-topping singles in front of your iPad, PC or next-generation video game console just yet. Regardless of how these games’ SoundScan numbers pan out in the immediate future, it may be irrelevant. Helping to pioneer new ways to experience and enjoy some of history’s greatest recordings, not to mention blowing open the doors for tomorrow’s headlining acts, consider. Instead of them being an indicator that it’s time to say goodnight and leave the building, the music game industry’s current growing pains may rather be a sign that the party’s just getting started…

Scott Steinberg
“The Hardest Working Man in Gaming”
[www.thekvideoameexpert.com](http://www.thekvideoameexpert.com)

Igniting online album sales and blazing a trail of packed houses from here to Bonnaroo, today’s biggest and most gossiped-about musical performers shockingly aren’t even musicians in the traditional sense. Still, between kick-starting the careers of scrappy acts such as Freezepop and Bang Camaro, shifting upwards of 100 million digital singles combined, prompting an uptake in teen truancy and upstaging karaoke as bar owners’ favorite happy hour shtick, it’s no wonder powerhouse music video game franchises like *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band* were, until recently when everything juddered to a halt, being hailed as today’s “recording industry savior™.”

But with all due respect to those late to the party, which neither begins with freestyling pastel dogs nor ends with synchronized teams of plus-sizers two-stepping to *Dance Dance Revolution*, that’s only half the story. Since the very beginning of interactive entertainment, when the Atari 2600 first emerged from the primordial ooze to grace mankind’s artistic canon with masterworks like *Porky’s* and *Earth Dies Screaming*, let it be known—there was rock.

Blame serendipity, or simple socialization. Given their shared background, yesterday’s bedroom coders (all-but-universally young, male, socially inept and obsessed with hard-charging riffs and bare-breasted, fantasy-themed vinyl covers) once swelled the ranks of a burgeoning cottage industry, unwittingly bringing music to the acne-covered masses. And through cultural osmosis, they inevitably passed their love of histrionic power chords and swelling choruses down from 5.25” disk to CD-ROM, shag-carpeted playroom to high-school cafeteria, paving the way for countless silicon-powered solos to come.

Of course, it looks to the cynics as though the age of the music game has finally passed—sales are falling, plastic instruments are being cast by the wayside and gamers are moving on en masse. Or are they? Sure, things seem bleak, but as they say, the night’s always darkest before the dawn. With that in mind then, we reckon it’s time to rewind the historical 8-track and chart the genre’s most influential milestones—the best, the worst, the inexplicably bizarre and (nearly) everything in between.

Volume up to 11, people… it’s about to get loud.
SIMON
From: Milton Bradley
Released: 1978
Behind The Music: Launched on May 15 at Studio 54, this Jurassic forerunner to today’s touch-sensitive Nintendo DS featured four colored buttons (red, green, yellow and blue) and three simple variations on its gameplay. A great memory is crucial—players have to repeat back a randomized or user-created sequence of lights and tones with a simple poke. Named after the child’s game ‘Simon Says’ and created by Ralph Baer—who also invented home console gaming with the Magnavox Odyssey in 1972—it quickly became an American institution.

Why It Rocks: Besides single-handedly popularizing handheld electronic entertainment and directly influencing every subsequent system from the Game Boy to the PlayStation Portable (PSP), its pattern-based action formed the basis for nearly all music-themed titles to come. In fact, that goes double for many of the current generation’s most ‘innovative’ offerings, which (holy déja vu, Batman!) simply require enthusiasts to play back notes synchronized to audiovisual prompts that appear on-screen. Note that some game designers do disagree with this analysis though, arguing that it’s a sequence memorization game in which rhythm plays no role, with rhythm games rather based on pattern sight-reading in their opinion. The good news: We’ll leave it to your sore thumbs and tired feet to make the distinction.

Did You Know… Not only is Simon still available to buy today, but it makes regular appearances in modern pop culture too. Cartoon shows such as Dexter’s Laboratory, Family Guy and Robot Chicken have made reference to it, and Blizzard’s World Of Warcraft even has two quests (in the Blade’s Edge Mountains) where you have to play a life-size version of the game.

KISS PINBALL
From: Bally Midway
Released: 1978
Behind The Music: Resplendent in dragons, flames, lightning bolts and chessboard-colored face paint, this classic flipper-swatter featured enough flashing lights and table-shaking tones to pass for one of its headliners’ infamous stage acts. It also stands as one of the very first music/gaming tie-ins.

Why It Rocks: The table lovingly showcases Gene Simmons’ proboscis-like tongue and offers chilling foreshadowing as to his fellow rockers’ insatiable appetite for high-tech merchandising to come. Amusingly, it was later reprised with a horrible but unrelated PC/PlayStation follow-up that didn’t even feature licensed music or speech samples. Genius!

Did You Know… Trent Reznor from Nine Inch Nails, who did the music for id Software’s Quake, is the proud owner of an original 1978 KISS pinball table.

JOURNEY
From: Bally Midway
Released: 1983
Behind The Music: Riding high on 1983’s No. 2-charting Frontiers album and with spirits undoubtedly buoyed by one of the music industry’s first sponsorship deals (with Budweiser), the San Francisco balladeers were tapped by coin-operated amusement staple Bally Midway to computerize their brand of corporate rock.

The setup: controlling band members with cartoon torsos and black-and-white photos for heads, the player avoids or blasts glowing alien adversaries while collecting instruments to be rewarded with an animated concert complete with a cassette player-fueled rendition of Separate Ways. Having been named one of Game Informer magazine’s Top 10 Worst Licensed Game Ideas Ever, we can only assume editors hadn’t played Data Age’s Journey Escape for Atari 2600—released a scant year earlier, this home console counterpart, also inexplicably set in space, saw you fighting intergalactic groupies (read: hearts with legs) and promoters (floating heads) with the help of roadies in hopes of reaching your insect-like spaceship. Seriously.

Why It Rocks: Purely for permanently setting the quality bar for hard-rockin’ videogame cash-ins somewhere around Mariana Trench level, a proud tradition that’s still alive and well today (Lady Gaga Revenge, anyone?). The cosmic irony is that both Journey outings feature snippets of Don’t Stop Believing—after roughly 90 seconds playing either game, we only wish it were that easy.

Did You Know… Journey was the first ever example of a band being given its own licensed videogame—previously, only pinball tables had played host to such branding. One might argue that the title paved the way for every other band appearance, or interactive tribute (e.g. Green Day: Rock Band, Guitar Hero: Aerosmith, etc.) since.
WILL HARVEY’S MUSIC CONSTRUCTION SET  
From: Electronic Arts  
Released: 1984  
Behind The Music: Fifteen year-old Will Harvey was an Apple II protégé responsible for building this intuitive, drag-and-drop user interface-powered (if tedious to operate) song building kit while still in high school.  
Why it Rocks: One of the earliest forerunners of ProTools, it proved that a voracious appetite for music-themed desktop titles existed. The program also provided an early hit for then-nascent publisher Electronic Arts long before it debuted Madden NFL, let alone dreamed of creating in-game star-filled soundtracks that could give the likes of Good Charlotte hundreds of spins.  
Did You Know… Will Harvey later went on to found the popular massively-multiplayer 3D online universe There.com—designed for online socializing, it predates the release of Sony's PlayStation Home by a decade.

BREAK DANCE  
From: Epyx  
Released: 1984  
Behind The Music: California Games wasn’t even a twinkle in daddy Epyx’s eyes when the company first offered Commodore 64 owners the chance to do the worm by using joystick inputs to repeat back computerized dancers’ moves.  
Why it Rocks: As primitive as popping-and-locking may seem here, it nonetheless kicked open the door for game makers to shine the light on musical subcultures, not just songs (a method later to be explored in titles like B-Boy and Def Jam: Fight for New York). Besides, as rudimentary as the animation is, every move looks like you’re doing the robot.  
Did You Know… The most recent game to bring breakdancing to videogames was Red Bull BC One for the Nintendo DS, which sees players drawing geometric shapes on the touch screen in order to recreate breakdance moves in one-on-one street battles. The game is licensed from the official Red Bull Breakdance Championship, which takes place every year. Also, new Commodore 64 computers with familiar old-school, chunky beige styling but modern-day PC hardware inside are now available, in case you want to compare the original Break Dance using a software emulator such as Frodo or C64 Forever.

FRANKIE GOES TO HOLLYWOOD  
From: Denton Designs/Ocean  
Released: 1985  
Behind The Music: Launched on British home computers, this offbeat adventure saw you playing mini-games, solving murders and otherwise attempting to escape life as a boring, nondescript sod on Liverpool’s streets. Admittance to the fabled Pleasuredome—your ultimate goal—came at a price though: Specifically, having to boost your sex, war, love and religion attributes, each statistic inspired by ciphers on the dance-pop staple’s album covers.  
Why It Rocks: Hailed as a classic across the pond, it helped break down barriers for independent game makers and was amongst the first titles to dabble with symbolism (a prelude to later offerings like Peter Gabriel’s EVE and Devo’s Adventures Of The Smart Patrol). Further reflecting the free-spirited, DIY design ethos that defined the early-‘80s garage coder era—seriously, nearly a quarter-century on, we’re still left clueless by what it all means—it additionally proves the band’s mantra of ‘Relax, don’t do it’ also applies to hallucinogens.  
Did You Know… The original ZX Spectrum version of the game came packaged with an extra cassette featuring a live version of the hit single Relax. Frankie say, “Hell yeah!”
THE HISTORY OF MUSIC GAMES

OTOCKY

From: ASCII Corporation
Released: 1987

Behind the Music: Released only for the Famicom Disc System in Japan, Otocky was a side-scrolling shooter that let the player fire in eight directions, with each direction producing a different note. In this way, the player could essentially become a composer and add their own beats to the background music, making the game an early preface to later music creation studios such as MTV Music Generator, Traxxpad and Beaterator.

Why It Rocks: Think generative music content is a modern-day thing? Think again. While Rez gets most of the credit for allowing players to directly influence the background music through their actions, Otocky—which does exactly the same thing—predates it by 15 years.

Did You Know… The man responsible for creating Otocky, Toshio Iwai, was also behind Nintendo’s quirky music creation ‘game’ Electroplankton.

ROCKSTAR

From: Wizard Games
Released: 1989

Behind The Music: A forgotten DOS gem, this all-text outing is the earliest popular business simulation to fully embrace the shadier aspects of backstage life, including use of controlled substances and groupie exploitation.

Why It Rocks: Generations before Midway’s NARC glorified narcotics, Rockstar actually offered you the opportunity to manage coke or pot intake, with side-effects ranging from creativity boosts to painful stints in rehab. Pro tip: Although he was only 10 years-old at the time of its original debut, any developers currently looking to reprise the idea should take our recommendation of hiring Pete Doherty as a creative consultant.

Did You Know… Other options open to your musician while playing Rockstar include “Laze around for a while,” “Have a holiday” and “Unwind in a sanitorium.” Just like real life pop stars then, eh?

DANCE AEROBICS

From: Nintendo
Released: 1989

Behind the Music: Actually created by Bandai as the third part of its Family Trainer series (which was resurrected on the Wii over a decade later), Dance Aerobics saw players replicating an on-screen instructor’s movements by stepping on the corresponding button on the Power Pad, an NES floor-mat controller, in time to the music. It included a Twister-style mode where you had to use both your hands and feet, as well as a primitive music composer where stepping on buttons created different notes.

Why It Rocks: It was the first videogame to tie a mat-based controller and music together, thereby making it the very first rhythm action game. And you thought Konami’s Dance Dance Revolution came up with the idea…

Did You Know… The Power Pad was actually a double-sided mat; side A had eight buttons while side B, the side needed to play Dance Aerobics, had 12.

ROCK STAR ATE MY HAMSTER

From: Codemasters
Released: 1988

Behind The Music: As much a budget-balancing challenge as an interactive satire, this money-managing game tasks you, in the role of scummy manager Cecil Pitt, with the job of guiding pop star parodies such as Dorrissey, Maradona and Bill Collins to gold record-selling status.

Why It Rocks: For the first time (and long before later debuts like 2001’s Rock Manager and 2010 Facebook release RecordShop Tycoon), we had a game that chronicles almost every aspect of recording industry self-production/promotion, from gigging and publicity stunts to dealing with piracy and shooting videos. Also, Bruce Stringbean and Tina Turnoff still make us giggle.

Did You Know… When it was originally released, several retail stores refused to stock the game due to what they considered to be offensive content. The title was inspired by a famous (and utterly fabricated) tabloid newspaper headline which accused a then-popular comedian of eating someone’s pet hamster.
Even the best video game music is still stereotyped as a bunch of bleeps and bloops; just watch a modern TV show that features at least one scene where the characters bash at controllers and are held in thrall by the sounds of Atari’s *Pac-Man* if you don’t believe us.

Still, gamers know better. Though a game can’t prop itself up on its backing music alone, a quality soundtrack is typically what imprints a title in the memories of its fans. Long-time gamers in particular enjoy a special relationship with game music in all its forms and formats, especially the quirkiness of 8-bit chiptunes.

Of course, putting together a list of the best and most inspirational video game tracks is kind of like choosing the ten human beings most worthy of repopulating planet Earth after an apocalypse. Nevertheless, we’ve given it a go… but forgive us for trying to prevent bloodshed by granting a free space to Koji Kondo’s classic *Super Mario Bros.* theme, K?

**WipEout: Soundtrack** *(PlayStation)*

Had Psygnosis’ futuristic sci-fi racing game not been loaded with dazzling electronica beats—mostly created by Tim Wright, aka CoLD StRAGE, the man behind the music for numerous classic digital diversions like *Lemmings* and *Shadow Of The Beast*—then who knows if it would have been as absorbing? Throw in a couple of recognizable chart tunes from the likes of Leftfield, The Chemical Brothers and Orbital, and you’ve got a soundtrack that’s so good, you could practically put it on a CD and sell it in music shops. Which is pretty much what the creators did, allowing anyone to experience its near-pristine fusion of trance, house and dance tracks, an unmistakable product of the mid-’90s era which complemented the game’s lightning-paced on-screen turn and burn antics brilliantly.

**Halo 3: Main Theme** *(Xbox 360)*

Alien war is serious business and to emphasize the point, Bungie gave us the beautifully orchestrated intro theme for *Halo 3*. The Covenant can brave the Spartans’ superhuman fighting skills, but can they stand against hordes of gamers inspired by a chorus of violins? We think not.

**Katamari Damacy: Katamari On The Rocks** *(PlayStation 2)*

The iconic intro song for *Katamari Damacy* is wonderfully weird. Then again, we’re talking about a game featuring the Prince of All Cosmos rolling up all manner of earthly goods to replace the stars his father wrecked during a drunken fit. In fairness, some soft, soothing Mozart just wouldn’t fit.
**Final Fantasy VI: Dark World** *(SNES)*

How do you narrow down Final Fantasy’s legendary soundtrack to just one song, loaded as the tunes are with heartbreak, love and loss and sweet, sweet victory in the face of crushing defeat? Well, you can throw a dart at a list of songs that are native to each Final Fantasy game, for starters. After all, we have the Prelude, the Crystal Song and the Victory Theme, the last of which lets players know it’s okay to breathe again. But in the interest of sparking angry conversation, we’re going to cite Final Fantasy VI as the showcase for the best Final Fantasy tunes. From there, we’re going to suggest that Dark World is the game’s most chilling, emotional song; it’s what appears in the background shortly after one of the main characters, Celes, wakes up in a post-apocalyptic wasteland that’s been rendered infertile by the whims of a crazy clown-god. After surviving a suicide attempt, Celes begins a potentially fruitless search for survivors—suffice it to say, it’s definitely not the stuff Sesame Street songs are made of.

**Mega Man 2: Dr. Wily Fortress** *(NES)*

The Blue Bomber takes credit for some of the most incredible musical accomplishments performed on game consoles across gaming history, but few will argue that the most iconic tune belongs to Dr. Wily’s first fortress stage in Mega Man 2. Talk about perfect placement; this song is exactly what you need to pump you up for the final ascent to Wily’s living room. Then again, Mega Man titles know how to play with your emotions as the action winds down—for instance, consider the moody background music that follows you as you make your way to the final boss, Sigma, in Mega Man X for the SNES.

**Shadow Of The Colossus: The Opened Way** *(PlayStation 2)*

Really, is there any game more perfect than Shadow Of The Colossus? It plays brilliantly, it still looks beautiful (even moreso in the PS3 re-release) and the soundtrack is enough to bring a tear to the eye of a statue. The ominous thudding of The Opened Way is swordsman Wander’s only companion as he scurries along the backs of giant, solemn godlike beings the Colossi that are thousands of times his size, then slays each in turn.

**Chrono Cross: Time’s Scar** *(PlayStation)*

Depending on who you ask, Chrono Cross is either the ideal successor to the SNES fantasy role-playing game (RPG) classic Chrono Trigger or else it’s a royal mess. Both sides can agree on one thing, however: the game’s soundtrack is gorgeous. Its opening piece, Time’s Scar, starts off melancholy, but then whips into a frenzy of violins about a minute in, leaving it both heartfelt and irresistible. We’ll also grant an honorable mention to Chrono Trigger’s ending piece, the piano-rich To Faraway Times. It’s a bittersweet tune that has a certain finality to it, an interesting quality for a game that has a dozen different endings.

**Portal: Still Alive** *(PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360)*

Yes, yes, we know—cake, lies and so on. But while Still Alive, the ending tune for Portal as sung by GLaDOS, may be overplayed, that’s because it’s all kinds of brilliant. It’s catchy, it’s funny and it sets the stage for Portal 2 just nicely. Heck, maybe the Internet has already learned its lesson about running a good thing into the ground (fat chance).
Secret of Mana: Angel’s Fear (Super Nintendo)

Secret of Mana has one of the most succinct introduction sequences of any role-playing game, but it’s also one of the most memorable, thanks to the pianos and chorus that make up its opening title, Angel’s Fear. Coupled with the peaceful opening image of the game’s heroes standing in front of the lush green Mana Tree, it’s an intro you won’t often skip no matter how many times you play the game. If you get far enough into the adventure, make sure to take a long listen to Dark Star, another ambitious (if rather foreboding) tune. Haven’t got a SNES? Don’t worry, it’s out on iPhone and iPad now as well…

Legend Of Zelda: Majora’s Mask: Song Of Healing (Nintendo 64)

Everybody’s familiar with the main theme from fantasy dungeon crawling classic The Legend of Zelda. You could conceivably approach a stranger on the street, hum the start of the theme and there’s a 50-50 chance that said stranger will join in. So let’s talk about a deserving Zelda theme that far fewer people recognize: The Song Of Healing from Zelda: Majora’s Mask. The Song Of Healing is the primary theme for Majora’s Mask and if you listen to it, you’ll get a good sense of the game’s overall mood. Few people realize it, but Majora’s Mask is a very dark, very melancholy game, much more so than even The Legend Of Zelda: Twilight Princess. The concept for Majora’s Mask centers around restoring hope to a world that’s mere days away from being destroyed, but this time it’s not as easy as picking up a sword and having a pointed talk with evil villain Ganon. Fixing the land of Termina means healing all the smaller hurts that people are suffering as a result of the doom hanging over them, and that’s what The Song Of Healing is all about: Link uses it to help characters chase away their demons and, if nothing else, meet the coming of the darkness with their minds at ease. It’s not a happy song by any means, but something about it says, ‘Hey man… you’re okay’.

MICHAEL JACKSON’S MOONWALKER

From: Sega
Released: 1990

Behind The Music: A Smooth Criminal-era arcade and Genesis title that saw the skull-faced, androgynous albino King of Pop shimmying it out with suited thugs to rescue kidnapped children, way before the concept became so ironic.

Why It Rocks: You mean apart from an inexplicable cameo by Bubbles the chimp, who turns you into a laser-spewing robot? Surprisingly enjoyable to play and featuring MJ’s direct creative input in the development, it showed that with a little TLC, even the strangest SoundScan spin-off could (gasps!) occasionally be good. It was also a forerunner for Jacko’s involvement in other games such as Space Channel 5 and the posthumously created motion-controlled dance and karaoke simulator, Michael Jackson: The Experience.

Did You Know… Jackson also turned up as an unlockable character in Midway’s boxing title Ready 2 Rumble: Round 2. Oddly, there was no dancing involved, only punching.

LOOM

From: LucasArts
Released: 1990

Behind The Music: Adventure games (mouse-driven scavenger hunts interwoven with quirky dialog and poorly-animated cutscenes) were once huge on home computers, but were largely confined to formulaic fantasy, sci-fi and tongue-in-cheek outings. Or, at least, they were until genre kingpin LucasArts told the haunting tale of Bobbin Threadbare, a magical Weaver who used combinations of notes to string together tunes that acted as puzzle-solving spells.

Why It Rocks: Rather than simply chat to non-player characters or collect items, a mystic staff was employed to craft these otherworldly ditties, which could also be played in reverse to create opposing effects (bleaching versus dyeing clothes) and, as a result, still more haunting jingles. The first game of its ilk to explore melody as a control method, as well as a best-seller and instant classic, a pair of planned sequels sadly never materialized due to team members’ preoccupation with other projects.

Did You Know… The original release of Loom, before it was made available on emulators and online digital stores like Steam, came with a cassette tape featuring a 30-minute audio drama that acted as a prologue to the game. You can still find it today in MP3 format by doing a quick search on the Internet…
**MIRACLE PIANO TEACHING SYSTEM**
*From:* The Software Toolworks  
*Released:* 1990  
*Behind The Music:* While actual owners of it were rare due to its wallet-crushing $500 price, this physical MIDI-keyboard-touting piano trainer enjoyed high visibility as a standout catalog and marketing piece for the Nintendo Entertainment System.

**Why It Rocks:** As one of few titles that aimed to expand the mega-popular console’s musical ambitions (not to mention those of its wide-eyed grade school audience), it further served to illustrate set-top systems’ viability for use with more than just mindless platform-hoppers. Plus, if you could convince your parents to purchase it at the time—remember, that’s $500 in 1990 terms—any other essential cartridge from *Final Fantasy* to *Super Mario Bros.* 3 looked like a steal by comparison.

**Did You Know…** Although the original NES version required you to plug the keyboard into the console to play it, no sound was generated by Nintendo’s machine. All the MIDI effects were produced directly by the keyboard’s built-in speakers, which was useful as it meant you could use it as a stand-alone keyboard as well as a game controller.

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**MARIO PAINT**
*From:* Nintendo  
*Released:* 1992  
*Behind The Music:* Yeah, you read that right… *Mario Paint*. It’s a paint program! On the Super Nintendo! And yet somehow, throwing in a music generator as part of the in-game animation package just because it felt right created a monster that, to this day, is still thriving on the Internet via fan-made software and the wonders of online video.

**Why It Rocks:** Type *Mario Paint* into YouTube and you’ll see exactly what kind of an effect the music generator has had on chiptune geeks all around the world. We’re talking thousands upon thousands of tunes, ranging from game music to popular hits from the charts (and, believe it or not, *Through The Fire And The Flames* by Dragonforce) all recreated using a few Mario heads and a bunch of other iconic… er, icons. And thanks to *Mario Paint Composer*—a free download for the PC—you don’t even need a SNES to try it out these days. Surprising that Nintendo’s let that one slip through the cease-and-desist net…

**Did You Know…** A 19-note tune created by Kazumi Totaka, a music composer famous for working on numerous Nintendo titles, is hidden on the *Mario Paint* title screen as a hidden extra (you click on the O of the logo to play it). This was the first time it had appeared in a Nintendo title, although it’s since appeared in nearly every game that Totaka has worked on including *Animal Crossing*, *Link’s Awakening* and *Luigi’s Mansion*.

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**MOTÖRHEAD**
*From:* Virgin Games  
*Released:* 1992  
*Behind The Music:* Picture side-scrolling fantasy brawler *Golden Axe*, only with a handlebar moustache and fondness for fetish gear (actually, wasn’t that *Golden Axe* anyway?). When Lemmy’s bandmates get kidnapped, Mr Kilmister takes to the streets, assaulting backwards ballcap-sporting chumps with his fists, bass guitar and flame-spitting belch. Mercifully, it was only released on the Euro-centric Amiga computer…

**Why It Rocks:** In a tip of the hat (and facial mole) to David Hasselhoff, *Motorhead* illustrates that just because you can’t sell two units in North America, it doesn’t mean you can’t be a cult icon in the Old World. The game’s probably still huge in Lithuania.

**Did You Know…** Each level ended with a mini-game for you to play, offering up tasks such as riding your motorbike without crashing, picking up groupies, smacking hippies about and guzzling beer. Lemmy must have been so proud.

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**CRÜE BALL**
*From:* Electronic Arts  
*Released:* 1992  
*Behind The Music:* Pinball goes glam, with digitized renditions of Motley Crüe’s *Dr Feelgood*, *Live Wire* and *Home Sweet Home* accompanying the vertically-scrolling, on-table action, which offered delightful targets like maggots and skulls to squash.

**Why It Rocks:** Heavy metal plus pinball and a special appearance by one-time mascot Alister Fiend? Works for us. If you weren’t, like, so there at the time, dude, chances are you didn’t have a Y chromosome…

**Did You Know…** This only became a Motley Crüe game late in development; originally, Electronic Arts was considering basing it around the *Headbanger’s Ball*, but MTV rejected requests for the license. We’ll leave you to fire up a Sega Genesis emulator like Gens or Fusion and decide whether this was a wise decision in retrospect.
**ROCK N’ ROLL RACING**
*From: Interplay  
Released: 1993*

**Behind The Music:** An early collaboration between development studio Silicon & Synapse and industry legend Brian Fargo’s Interplay, this arcade racer nearly single-handedly destroyed millions of high-school GPAs. A spiritual sequel to NES cult classic *R.C. Pro-Am* (and a direct sequel to *RPM Racing*, since it was originally developed as *RPMII*), it featured heavily-armed miniaturized cars jockeying to outmaneuver or blow each other to bits to backing tracks like “Born To Be Wild” and “Paranoid.”

**Why It Rocks:** As well as being among competitive multiplayer gaming’s earliest hits, its catchy blend of combat and hairpin turns made for an unexpectedly satisfying destruction derby.

**Did You Know…** You probably know Silicon & Synapse by a different and far more well-known name these days—it evolved into Blizzard Entertainment, the giant behind *Diablo* and *World of Warcraft*.

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**CPU BACH**
*From: MicroProse  
Released: 1994*

**Behind The Music:** Designed by legendary developer Sid Meier (the genius responsible for *Civilization* and *Pirates!*), this bizarre side-project let you set parameters for the software to create virtual concertos around. Sadly, given the 3DO’s limited sell-through, audiences remained mostly deaf to the program’s potential.

**Why It Rocks:** Relative obscurity aside, it brought classical composition to the mainstream in a way that’s yet to be topped. Indeed, only Nintendo’s promising-yet-ultimately-disappointing *Wii Music* has come close and that arrived 15 years after MicroProse’s efforts.

**Did You Know…** The title is actually a pun on Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, one of Bach’s sons. CPE… CPU. Yeah, we get it.

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**REVOLUTION X**
*From: Acclaim  
Released: 1994*

**Behind The Music:** Packing a full-size machine gun in the arcade (or a SNES/Genesis/PC controller for the home version), players overthrow the fun-squashing New Order Nation regime and save Aerosmith in a series of mind-numbing shooting gallery engagements.

**Why It Rocks:** Educational value at best. After all, what other game teaches us the dangers of hyperbole (CDs and laserdiscs double as grenades), poor contractual negotiation (Steven Tyler’s contributions mostly include shrieks of “Don’t give uuuuupp!”) and the danger of filtering social commentary through the marketing department’s eyes (enemies are led by the sunglass and leather bustier-sporting dominatrix Headmistress Helga)?

**Did You Know…** The lady who played Headmistress Helga, Kerri Hoskins, also played the role of Sonya Blade in several *Mortal Kombat* games, as well as on the live *Mortal Kombat* tour.

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**QUEST FOR FAME**
*From: Virtual Music/IBM  
Released: 1995*

**Behind The Music:** Fusing an ill-conceived electronic gadget (in this case, a chunky plastic wedge known as the VPick, which allowed you to strum on any surface to play featured tracks) and adventure (compete to headline a stadium show with Aerosmith), it’s a living monument to CD-ROM era excess. Although, in fairness, even these items’ heady decadence was eclipsed by the Ahead Virtual Guitar, a full-sized guitar peripheral from the same maker (Ahead Inc.) that—despite appearing long before *Guitar Freaks*’ signature accessories—was abandoned in favor of the VPick due to its prohibitive costs.

**Why It Rocks:** As well as being yet another inexplicable cameo opportunity for Tyler and friends, the rhythm-based mechanics and obvious thematic similarities planted the seeds for *Guitar Hero*’s eventual arrival. More importantly though, the game’s spectacular failure proves that if music game developers want their games to succeed, they need to create controllers that don’t make the user feel compelled to kick their own ass for using these devices in public.

**Did You Know…** Aerosmith’s album *Nine Lives* featured a CD-ROM track that loaded a rudimentary drum simulator created by Virtual Music onto your PC. To play it, the company introduced the V-Stix—a virtual drum pad controller that pre-dated *Rock Band*’s efforts by over a decade.
Music games have thrived (or at least survived) over the years for two reasons. One, they’re gosh darn fun. Two, interacting with music and rhythm games often requires a peripheral or a gesture that goes beyond the realm of what’s typical for standard video game experiences. For that reason, even sub-par music gaming outings have a way of sticking around in our memory, even as lesser traditional games slip from our brain and fade away forever. Here are five inventions—and innovations—that helped define the rhythm and music genre in video games.

Plastic Guitars, Drums and Other Instruments

By far the best-known peripheral for music games (not to mention the magical add-on that vaulted Guitar Hero and Rock Band into living rooms and pop culture stardom) is the now-ubiquitous plastic axe controller. This device wasn’t invented by Harmonix, though; Konami pioneered instrument-based music games with 1999’s GuitarFreaks in arcades all over Japan. Admittedly, the GuitarFreaks version was a little simpler than the take-home version that was eventually engineered by Harmonix—the former featured three fret buttons compared to the latter’s five, though GuitarFreaks players could also play with chorus/delay effects via a small knob situated on the guitar. Regardless of differences though, millions came together in agreement to vote with their wallets, making the plastic guitar a scene-setter for the music gaming genre, which quickly rocketed from obscurity to stardom with Guitar Hero’s release. Its success would later give birth to plastic drum sets, microphones and more, ushering a boom and bust period that would leave millions of closets worldwide awash in faux Stratocasters.

Dance Pads and Mats

Another innovation by Konami that helped allow music and video games to come together in sweet, sweet harmony. That said though, it’s technically incorrect to say that Konami created the interactive dance mat; the pad/platform that helped turn Dance Dance Revolution into a worldwide sensation essentially serves as a controller input for one’s feet, an idea Bandai and Nintendo had already experimented with in 1987 via the NES Power Pad. But unlike the Power Pad (which was coupled with a track-and-field game intended to trick kids into getting exercise), a Dance Mat is specifically utilized with movement-based music games that require the player to time their steps accordingly to on-screen arrow prompts, thereby letting them ‘dance’ to the music. Dance Dance Revolution arcade units and home ports still enjoy relative popularity, and have even been utilized in physical education programs in schools across America, meaning it’s very easy to find Dance Mats of all makes and shapes at stores and online nowadays.

Online Music Downloads, Add-Ons and Expansions

When the Guitar Hero series was still in its infancy, players had to strum along to the songs that were included on the initial disc and that’s it, since more music could only be acquired through the retail purchase of a new title. Of course, that all began to change when Internet-connected consoles like the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 provided easy access to online downloadable content, thereby letting players add more and more songs to their Guitar Hero and Rock Band libraries while paying a fraction of what a new game at retail would cost. Unfortunately, instead of restricting itself to DLC add-ons like MTV Games and Harmonix did with Rock Band, Activision continued to release full-priced discs at retail for several years, usually backing them up with some kind of tribute theme (like Guitar Hero: Aerosmith or Guitar Hero: Metallica). Instead of boosting sales, this actually helped accelerate the franchise’s decline and led to a massive freefall in sales for plastic instrument-based titles. Thankfully, smartphone-based mobile gaming franchises and social games (such as the popular Tap Tap Revenge series) are helping usher in a new era for music downloads, allowing free play with the occasional purchase or download of more tunes or new playable songs through ongoing updates.

Real-World Music Tutorials and Lifelike Play

Videogames have been pulling double-duty as music teachers almost as far back as day one. The NES even boasted the Miracle Keyboard game pack/keyboard combination, which attempted to fool kids into believing that practicing piano could be as exciting as playing Super Mario. Of course, it wasn’t anywhere near as much fun, but hooking up a music lesson to a videogame is an interesting way of getting a kid interested in the arts. Besides, just because you couldn’t produce anything but a jangled discord in Mario Paint, that doesn’t mean that others haven’t made some pretty impressive stuff. Today’s music games still break out occasional lessons: try Rock Band 3’s realistic ‘Pro Mode’ if you really want to learn something. If nothing else, these features help to address concerns that tomorrow’s rock stars may be dying off, with an entire generation allegedly more interested in pretending to play guitar than actually learning to wield the real thing.

Microphone Controllers

Microphones have long been an important part of the gaming experience, especially for the PC and online console games (heck, the Nintendo DS and 3DS even boast built-in microphones). But the handheld stick microphone can be credited more than any plastic instrument for advancing the music game genre—without the plug-in USB-connected microphone, it wouldn’t be possible to perform home-based karaoke. No karaoke means no Karaoke Revolution and no vocals in Rock Band. Certainly, the world would be a sadder, quieter place without it.
**THE HISTORY OF MUSIC GAMES**

**SIMTUNES**
*From: Maxis*
*Released: 1996*

**Behind The Music:** It’s a simple concept—put down colored blocks representing notes, then place different colored bugs representing different instruments on the picture and set them off, manually controlling their direction and speed. The result is music… or an approximation thereof, at least. Of course, that’s before you get to grips with the range of notes and instruments, not to mention coughing up some serious creativity to do something rather more special.

**Why It Rocks:** Put a bit of thought into it and the creations you can come up with are truly staggering. Rather than just making a pretty picture to make a random tune or an ugly mash of color for a decent ditty, it’s perfectly possible to do both at the same time (as you’ll see if you type SimTunes into Google and check out the Images page). As is often the case with the best creative software, the only thing limiting you in SimTunes is your own imagination…

**Did You Know…** SimTunes was originally in development for Nintendo’s Super Nintendo Entertainment System (SNES) under the name Sound Fantasy, but it was cancelled. Exact reasons as to why that happened are unclear, but it’s believed that Nintendo didn’t have faith in its music-based gameplay (despite the inclusion of a successful music element in *Mario Paint*).

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**PARAPPA THE RAPPER**
*From: Sony Computer Entertainment America*
*Released: 1997*

**Behind The Music:** A far cry from what was going on with PCs at the time (see: bizarre adventures like Peter Gabriel’s *EVE*), this quirky PSOne Japanese import challenged players, as the titular paper doll pooch, to bust-a-move by pressing buttons in time to featured beats. Do it correctly and you drop mad science on onion-headed martial arts masters, moose driving instructors, Rastafarian frogs and chickens that pass for chefs. Captivating domestic audiences with its sing-song vibe, hypnotic play and psychedelic cardboard cutout aesthetic, it’s still one of the freshest interactive approximations of MCing hip-hop heads will find.

**Why It Rocks:** PaRappa brought the ‘rhythm game’ category home to North American shores, which eventually gave birth to countless hip-wiggling rivals from *Unison* to *Bust-A-Groove*.

**Did You Know…** PaRappa The Rapper creator Masaya Matsuura was previously the head of a Japanese progressive rock band (or “pop unit” as he labels it) called Psy•S. Formed in 1983, they had a number of hit records before disbanding in 1996 (three years after Matsuura had formed his own game development studio, NanaOn-Sha).

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**BEATMANIA**
*From: Konami*
*Released: 1997*

**Behind The Music:** Long before DJ Hero came on the scene, Konami’s DJ simulation equipped you with five keys and a turntable, demanding that players scratch their way through techno, drum’n’-bass and hip-hop tracks. Originally launched in Japanese arcades, the series is credited with starting the faux tune-playing craze, and launching the ‘Bemani’ genre, developer Konami’s signature line of plastic instrument peripheral-equipped interactive music titles.

**Why It Rocks:** Beatmania made quarter-munching dives cool again, and drafted the blueprint upon which nearly every single breakout success story has since been built. *Dance Dance Revolution*, played by physically shimmying on a virtual stage, is a direct descendant.

**Did You Know…** Bemani is also the name of Konami’s music game development division. It was originally called GMD (Game & Music Division) but had its name changed to reflect the genre that it helped invent.
SEX ‘N DRUGS ‘N ROCK ‘N ROLL

From: Sensible Software
Released: 1998

Behind The Music: Canceled due to controversial themes that no publisher would tackle in the halcyon, pre-Grand Theft Auto days, this long-lost classic would’ve been a risqué adventure chronicling desperate rock star Nigel’s rise to the top. Creator Sensible Software’s self-described ‘multimedia experience’ included 15 hours of lewd dialogue, animated music videos and a hero who could huff illicit substances, masturbate and, if he eschews condoms, even contract AIDS from groupies.

Why It Rocks: Nearly ten years in development, its production saga—conceived during home computing’s dawn and designed to launch its maker into the 3D era, signed to Time Warner, sold, dropped and beatified online by 38 year-old virgins—parallels that of legendary records. A classic cautionary tale, it could easily be the Chinese Democracy of gaming… albeit without the massive wave of disappointment that occurred once Axl’s album hit the shelves.

Did You Know… The full story of how Sex ‘N Drugs ‘N Rock ‘N Roll came into being? Then you’ll want to read the full expose from creator Jon Hare himself—we’ve got it over on page 82.

GUITARFREAKS

From: Konami
Released: 1998

Behind The Music: A breakout smash in Far Eastern arcades; armed with a Fender-like (and incredibly heavy) plastic guitar controller featuring fret buttons and a motion sensor, players shred along to on-screen graphical indicators. Sound familiar?

Why It Rocks: Despite Konami’s failure to capitalize on the series’ popularity in the US, the original ‘guitar hero’ actually predates its best-selling cousin by the better part of a decade (which explains Konami’s repeated lawsuits once Harmonix’s title hit the big time). Somewhere out there, we just know there’s an A&R guy-turned-custodial engineer still weeping into his Schlitz.

Did You Know… Not surprisingly, Konami decided to sue Harmonix for infringement of patents pertaining to its earlier music titles (like GuitarFreaks and Drummania). Harmonix then sued right back after Konami released Rock Revolution… though we think that was over more patent issues rather than the fact that the game sucked.

POP ‘N MUSIC

From: Konami
Released: 1998

Behind The Music: Nothing says hardcore Bemani gameplay like a controller with nine individual buttons. Trust Konami, the creators of the genre, to come up with something as ridiculously convoluted and yet infinitely playable as Pop ‘N Music, which matches brightly colored visuals and cuddly characters with insanely complex tunes and floods of button markers pouring down the screen for you to try and hit buttons along to. Unless you’re some kind of Tommy-esque savant though, you’ll fail… sorry, but it’s true.

Why It Rocks: The cartoon visuals belie a game that’s as cruel as it is fun, but beyond that Pop ‘N Music offers options to make things even harder. Choose Hidden and the notes will disappear once they get halfway down the screen, leaving it up to you to judge when they’ll hit the bottom; choose Sudden and they won’t appear until halfway down the screen. And if you choose Hidden/Sudden? Well, then you’ll only get a split-second flash of the markers, making it near impossible to know what’s going on. One for masochists only.

Did You Know… Since first appearing in 1998, there have been 20 different versions of Pop ‘N Music in the arcade and 17 unique home versions. Good lord!

BUST A GROOVE

From: 989 Studios/Enix
Released: 1998

Behind The Music: Think Dance Dance Revolution mixed with the spirit of street dance battling. Players chose their character from a varied selection (including a stripper-cum-fortune teller, a secretary, a scientist and a pair of dancing aliens) and then duke it out with other characters to prove they’re the best dancer. To do this, you have to input displayed directional inputs in time to the music, with the inputs getting increasingly complex as you get more correct in a row. ‘Jammer’ attacks could also be used to stop successful characters in their tracks, although these can be avoided using a well-timed press of the Square button.

Why It Rocks: Maybe it was the crazy character line-up; maybe it was excellent track line-up which covered all kinds of musical styles; maybe it was the combat side of things, making us feel like we were kings of the street. Either way, Bust A Groove was a great feel-good rhythm action title and one we wish they’d resurrect for the HD era.

Did You Know… The game was originally called Bust A Move in Japan, but had to have its name changed for the western market since Puzzle Bobble—a bubble-bursting puzzle game—had already been released under that title in the US and Europe.
MUSIC
From: Jester Interactive/Codemasters
Released: 1998
Behind The Music: Music creation tools were hardly new by 1998, but at the time, seeing them appear on a video game console (in this case, the PSOne) was rather unique. It may have taken people a little while to get used to the idea of banging out beats with their joypads, but Music nonetheless created a whole new market for people who wanted to turn that little grey box in the corner of their living rooms into a studio-level sequencer.

Why It Rocks: With the series having sold over a million copies and made cameos on systems ranging from the PC to PlayStation 2, it’s the most commercially successful creation tool of its type. It’s anyone’s guess just how many modern-day prodigies first discovered their passion for music, or talent for creating rump-shaking ditties, simply by popping it in the disc drive and hoisting a controller.

Did You Know… Jester actually released two handheld versions of the Music franchise, both entitled Pocket Music—one for the Game Boy Color and the other for the Game Boy Advance. Bizarrely, the Game Boy Color one was actually better (although the GBA version had samples from My Name Is by Eminem in it). Also: The Music franchise was destined to later appear in the US under several different names, including MTV Music Generator and Funkmaster Flex’s Digital Hitz Factory (Music 2000 and Music 3000 in Europe, respectively).

WU-TANG: SHAO LIN STYLE
From: Activision
Released: 1999
Behind The Music: Staten Island’s campy kung-fu clique (RZA, GZA, Raekwon and more—nine brawlers from Inspectah Deck to U-God appear) pummel martial arts-wielding opponents with karate kicks, special weapons and fatalities in this gonzo fighter. The shock surprise: ODB favors drunken style moves including an inexplicable decapitating finisher, possibly conceived in a fit of Colt 45-inspired dementia.

Why It Rocks: While of questionable quality and subject to a lukewarm critical reception, it proved there’s ample room in the 3D space to expand an artist’s surrounding mythology, as evidenced by 50 Cent’s later efforts.

Did You Know… The game evolved as a spin-off of a highly-questionable title featuring a leather-clad dominatrix, a redneck cannibal and a psychopathic midget (Thrill Kill) that was canned right before release. We’re not sure which is more preferable.

DANCE DANCE REVOLUTION
From: Konami
Released: 1999
Behind The Music: The arcade game that inspired a cultural revolution and pioneered active gaming over a decade before motion controls made Dance Central or Just Dance household names. Standing on a virtual dance stage, the player works up a rhythm and then steps, jumps and twists in time to floating arrow icons and J-Pop hits, hopefully performing something resembling an actual rump-shaking routine. Still a hot property even after more than a decade, new versions are hitting consoles and arcades regularly to keep the time-honored tradition of couch potato choreography going strong.

Why It Rocks: DDR has touched our society in so many ways, it’s amazing. It inspired local and national dance competitions; muscled its way into gyms nationwide; spawned a generation of footloose tweens who could contort like pretzels at the local Dave & Buster’s but barely shoulder lean otherwise; spawned over 100 hernia-inducing sequels/spin-offs; inspired numerous rivals like Pump It Up and In the Groove; and gave us all something to gawk at. Plus, it was actually adopted by states like West Virginia as part of state PE programs to combat childhood obesity, a marked step up from ego-crushing kickball competitions and those damn thigh-chafing ropes.

Did You Know… Playing DDR while holding the rear guard bar (which is there to prevent you from falling off the back of the machine) to improve balance and increase foot speed is known as “bar raping.” It’s also massively looked down on by experienced players and makes you look like a bit of an idiot.

UM JAMMER LAMMY
From: Sony Computer Entertainment America
Released: 1999
Behind The Music: A spin-off of the popular PaRappa the Rapper series which introduced fans to Lammy, the guitarist of band MilkCan, who—with the aid of well-timed key presses exactly like those in PaRappa—has to jam her way to a gig she’s late for.

Why It Rocks: Thanks to the introduction of guitar music over hip-hop, it exhibited how the basic rhythm game formula was easily transportable between musical genres, opening the door for punk, pop, rap and metal to later join the soiree.

Did You Know… In a weird and highly rare role reversal, Um Jammer Lammy actually made the leap from the PSOne to the arcade, complete with a guitar-shaped controller a la GuitarFreaks. It wasn’t an exact port though, as the set list was almost completely different.
There's nothing like attaching the name of a famous musician or band to draw attention to your new game. (See: The Beatles: Rock Band—a lavish tribute piece so far beyond anything on this list that it's its own standalone testament to the power of cross-promotion.) Of course, it doesn't always guarantee the game will be any good, but as these wild, weird and sometimes spectacularly disastrous or entertaining crossovers prove, at least it'll get people talking about your creation...

### Journey Escape (1982, Atari 2600)
What's your ultimate videogame fantasy—scoring that last-minute touchdown? Saving the princess? Ruling the world? For us, it's saving the members of Journey from being fleeced by photographers, shifty managers and groupies who look like hordes of candy hearts. Really, it is. Plus, it's your one chance to hum "just a small town girl" while backed by an Atari-grade chiptune. Don't stop believin', man...

### Michael Jackson's Moonwalker (1989, Arcade/Sega Genesis/Home Computers)
Yes, so this is one of the few games that we've mentioned twice in this epic history rundown, but for good reason—it's one of the first examples of how music and movies came together in gaming to make a successful package. Between the use of MJ's tunes, the loose plot taken from the movie (which, let's be frank, was utterly bonkers) and the tried-and-tested beat-em-up formula that Sega had mastered by the late '80s and early '90s, the whole thing was a simple-yet-entertaining experience that we freely admit to pumping plenty of quarters into during our youth.

### Spice World (1998, PlayStation)
Spice World shrinks the UK's beloved Spice Girls down to super-deformed size and puts you in charge of formulating their dance routines with a whole lot of button pushes. Before you think that sounds like fun though, JC Herz from The New York Times best summed up the game by saying: "It didn't have to be." Then again, influenza, rabies, and splinters don't have to be either but, like the Spice World game, we've got 'em anyway.

### Guitar Hero: Metallica (2009, Xbox 360/PlayStation 3/Wii)
Unlike the other expansion packs masquerading as full-price games, Guitar Hero: Metallica—a dedicated band-specific tribute featuring some of the best-known works from the veteran heavy metal act—deserved its standalone status. Despite a lack of downloadable content, the game (which plays like a combined greatest hits retrospective and interactive collector's box set) is generally appreciated by critics and fans alike.

### 50 Cent: Bulletproof (2005, PlayStation 2/Xbox/PSP)
Who'd have thought that 50 Cent turning down the offer of voicing CJ Johnson in Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas would lead to the creation of 50 Cent: Bulletproof? The shooter may have had clumsy mechanics and didn't curry favor with reviewers or players, but some admit that the game's storyline is surprisingly compelling. Despite the critical drubbing though, it still sold a million units and spawned token (and actually not bad) sequel Blood On The Sand, a testament to Curtis' chart-topping power at the time.

### Blues Brothers (1991, NES/Game Boy/Home Computers)
The Blues Brothers' mission from God saw them hit many consoles and computers in the early '90s with a side-scrolling platform-hopper that saw you getting the Brothers to their concert on time. Thankfully, the next-generation follow-up—The Blues Brothers 2000—hit the N64 near the start of the millennium and was mercifully forgotten.

### Green Day: Rock Band (2010, Xbox 360/PlayStation 3)
Ineffable proof, as if proof were needed, that one of the best modern-day punk bands had totally sold out in favor of marketability. Green Day: Rock Band sat uncomfortably between AC/DC Rock Band (which was little more than an expansion pack for the first Rock Band game sold on a standalone disc) and The Beatles: Rock Band, which was an all-out tribute drenched with so much love and attention that we're shocked it didn't sell better. Yes, so Green Day's version had the boys on stage rocking out, but it didn't quite hold together as well as it should have—indeed, most people only bought it to import the songs into Rock Band 2 and 3, making the content around the music end up being totally redundant.

### All Night Nippon Super Mario Bros (1986, Famicom Disk System)
Ending on something a little different, All Night Nippon Super Mario Bros is a rare version of the original Super Mario Bros for NES, with the usual Goombas and Koopas altered to look like famous Japanese DJs and pop stars. Created as a giveaway by All Night Nippon, a popular Japanese radio show that's still on the air, the game was never officially available outside of Japan. If it had been though, it's fun to imagine the '80s-era singers and DJs Mario could have squashed: you could jump on Twisted Sister, though lead singer Dee Snider would probably bite back.
SAMBA DE AMIGO
From: Sega
Released: 1999
Behind The Music: A cult hit in arcades and on Sega’s Dreamcast console that put plastic maracas in your hands and had you shake-shake-shake through a trippy, Latin-flavored world of sombrero-clad monkeys and dancing bears.

Why It Rocks: *Samba* taught us an essential lesson—namely, that even the most seemingly-dumb activity can be made ten times cooler when it involves physically waving some gonzo electronic accessory and the kind of sensory backdrop that only LSD could inspire. Especially if it involves monkeys. Sega also brought an updated version to the Wii but, thanks to the shortcomings of the Wii remote over Sega’s original proprietary infra-red tech, it didn’t work nearly as well as it should have.

Did You Know… Sega actually created a spiritual successor to *Samba De Amigo* called *Shakatto Tambourine* that appeared in arcades across Japan. Not surprisingly, it involved shaking a tambourine and either hitting it at the right time or holding it at a particular angle.

VIB-RIBBON
From: Sony Computer Entertainment America
Released: 1999
Behind The Music: *PaRappa* creator and musical game genre pioneer Masaya Matsuura outdid himself here, with this later creation allowing you to insert any music CD into your PlayStation and enjoy uniquely-generated level designs. Wireframe graphics complemented the action, which featured a female rabbit running along a single-line pathway and avoiding obstacles generated from the music beats as tracks played in the background.

Why It Rocks: It was the first title to turn your record collection into an endless source of button-mashing replay value.

Did You Know… *Vib-Ribbon* actually spawned two sequels. One, *Mojib-Ribbon*, combined rap music with the art of Japanese calligraphy while the other, *Vib-Ripple*, swapped imported beats for imported digital photos to create its levels from.

DRUMMANIA
From: Konami
Released: 1999
Behind The Music: Riding high on the emerging wave of Bemani, Konami created a drum equivalent of its *GuitarFreaks* title. Packing a five-pad drum kit (as well as a bass drum pedal), the gameplay and appearance is nigh-on identical to *GuitarFreaks*. Notes drop from the top of the screen in columns, with each column representing a different pad on the drums; as they reach the bottom, the player has to hit the right pad with a grade being given according to how accurate they are. Being exclusively an arcade machine, it’s all about the showmanship—while the average person can probably get through a few songs just fine, the reward for becoming great at it is the eternal respect of everyone who sees you pulling off a Keith Moon without even breaking a sweat.

Why It Rocks: Although there’s a distinct question of affordability for any arcade wanting to make use of the function, it’s pretty damn awesome that Konami made *Drummania* compatible with its other big Bemani game, *GuitarFreaks*. Any arcade owning both machines actually has the option of linking them together for three-player gameplay, with one person using the drums and another two using guitars. There’s even scope for a ‘super session’ if anyone happens to also own compatible versions of *Drummania* (4th/5thMix) and *GuitarFreaks* (5th/6thMix) AND a *Keyboardmania 3rdMix* machine, allowing up to five people to play at once. How likely is that though? Not very.

Did You Know… In addition to actually being predated by performance simulator *MTV Drumscape*, while *Drummania* cabinets can be found in numerous arcades across the US, the game has never had an official release in the country from Konami. That’s because the US patent for anything described as a ‘drum simulation game’ has always been owned by someone other than Konami, making official releases of the series impossible—currently, the patent is held by Activision in relation to its *Guitar Hero series*. Importing cabinets from Japan, however, is another matter…
MTV MUSIC GENERATOR
From: Codemasters
Released: 1999
Behind The Music: A continuation (and North American rebranding) of Codemasters’ bestselling Music series that once again made playing producer easy by enabling owners to quickly and painlessly mix riffs, beats, sound effects and 3D visualizations.

Why It Rocks: Nearly a decade before Beaterator and Traxxpad launched, it explored the much-ignored subject of stepping behind the actual boards and dialing up dance-ready joints (yours to distribute free of royalties or licensing restrictions, no less) for non-commercial purposes. Who knows how many DJs it inspired? That said, it pretty much did the same as the last one, only better—which, of course, makes it rock by default anyway.

Did You Know… The MTV branding was only applied to this game in the US—in Europe, it was simply known as Music 2000 and didn’t receive any MTV licensing until the third game, MTV Music Generator 2, came out for the PlayStation 2 in 2001.

SPACE CHANNEL 5
From: Sega
Released: 2000
Behind The Music: Think Simon for the Dreamcast generation—repeat moves according to displayed prompts to make cosmic reporter Ulala blast aliens, rescue brainwashed captives and otherwise jiggle her way through an intergalactic dance party.

Why It Rocks: An early critical favorite for the Dreamcast, it highlighted music games’ continued cultural resonance, showing they even enjoyed enough inherent mass appeal to kick-start interest in a new console. It even features a random cameo by Michael Jackson and was resurrected as part of Sega’s drive to bring classic franchises to the Xbox 360.

Did You Know… Ever wonder what happened to Lady Miss Kier, lead singer of Deee-Lite, known for their hit single “Groove Is In The Heart?” She ended up owing Sega costs of $608,000 after losing a lawsuit against them claiming that they’d stolen her image (namely the knee-high boots, ponytail and skirt) to use for Ulala’s look. Whoops.

KISS PSYCHO CIRCUS: THE NIGHTMARE CHILD
From: Gathering of Developers
Released: 2000
Behind The Music: Don’t let the KISS goodness fool you; Nightmare Child was a nondescript first-person shooter inspired by Todd McFarlane’s cult comic books that re-imagines the hard-rocking quartet as supernatural warriors sent to eradicate ancient evil.

Why It Rocks: Long before Family Jewels restored Gene Simmons to modern-day relevancy, the title helped to reintroduce the band to a new generation of tech-savvy comic book fans as virtually animated saviors of humanity. Sadly, much like little-known splat-’em-up Ed Hunter (1999) starring Iron Maiden’s mascot Eddie, Nightmare Child reminds us that interactive crossovers are best confined to logical spin-offs and grounded in real-world dramas.

Did You Know… Todd McFarlane has never had much luck with videogames. His other big creation, Spawn, was turned into a lackluster 3D action game by Capcom subtitled In The Demon’s Hand, while his own gaming creation, McFarlane’s Evil Prophecy for the PlayStation 2, is as terrible as it is… well, terrible.

FREQUENCY
From: Sony Computer Entertainment America
Released: 2001
Behind The Music: Zooming down neon-lit 3D corridors, Frequency saw players tapping buttons when prompted to make notes, drums and vocals play, eventually completing entire songs by electronic gurus like Orbital, BT and The Crystal Method.

Why It Rocks: It was the first major console game, and the initial step towards exploring acoustics as gameplay elements, from fledging developer Harmonix. Yes, that’s right—the same Harmonix who later went on to invent seminal titles like Guitar Hero, Rock Band and Dance Central. Its sequel, Amplitude (2003), added online elements and higher-profile song licensing, hinting at key features of Harmonix’s later hits.

Did You Know… The very last song in the game, End of Your World, is by Robokid—otherwise known as Josh Randall, who works as the Creative Director at Harmonix. Three cheers for nepotism.
THE HISTORY OF MUSIC GAMES

REZ
From: Sega
Released: 2001

Behind The Music:
Enter a surreal, vector graphics representation of cyberspace and clear it of viruses by using a targeting reticle to highlight enemies and dispatch them in a psychedelic spray of colored light and shapes. Ever-present house music rounds out the experience's peyote-tinged flavor, which players can currently experience as Rez HD on the Xbox 360.

Why It Rocks: One of the earliest games obviously intended to be played under the influence, Rez’s use of synesthesia (the stimulation of various senses through a single sensory input; in this case, sound) is well documented. It also integrated support for the Trance Vibrator, a USB gizmo that shuddered and pulsed in time with the soundtrack, further prompting several fans to conduct well-publicized experiments in masturbation. We can only hope that Child Of Eden, a trippy motion controlled shooter for PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 that’s compatible with Microsoft’s Kinect gesture-tracking camera and acts as a spiritual sequel to Rez, won’t inspire similar results…

Did You Know… THQ’s de Blob (2008) on Wii similarly uses synesthesia in its gameplay; as Blob paints buildings, different colored paints create different musical effects that can be layered on top of one another when applied in sequence.

UNISON
From: Tecmo
Released: 2001

Behind The Music: Before it scarred our souls with the impossibly-hard return of Ryu Hayabusa in next-gen NES remake Ninja Gaiden, Tecmo was busy making us bop along to crazy J-Pop while three young anime girls saved the world from the evil Ducker. Although the concept seems very Dance Dance Revolution, the controls made the game feel different—you had to use the analogue sticks to mimic the on-screen action, following markers that guided you (in the US version, at least; they were only on screen during practice in the Japanese version). Even with the markers though, it was hard… like, really hard.

Why It Rocks: We rather like how Tecmo handled letting players choose which difficulty to play the game on; rather than just giving them an option on a menu, it’s tied into which character they choose to play as. Trill, the blonde, is Normal, Cela with green hair is Hard, and redhead Chilly is Very Hard. Clever, eh?

Did You Know… Why’s the villain called Ducker? Because he rides around in a giant rubber duck that hovers off the floor. Obviously.

KARAOKE REVOLUTION
From: Konami
Released: 2001

Behind The Music: In spite of the success of standalone karaoke home systems years prior, this was the first videogame to actually put a microphone in wannabe stars’ hands and encourage them to torture friends and neighbors with off-key warbling.

Why It Rocks: Although it only judged pitch instead of vocal accuracy or intonation, Konami proved there was a major market for living room caterwauling long before SingStar, American Idol and LIPS ever even got the green light.

Did You Know… Konami may have published it, but Karaoke Revolution was developed by Harmonix. No doubt they used it as an experiment to perfect their own technology that would later be incorporated into Rock Band…
There are often long stretches of pop culture history where most music sounds incredibly manufactured, leaving tunes that stand out as something different to only catch our ears every once in a while. The same can be said for music-based videogames; the likes of Guitar Hero, for instance, may be fun, but it hasn’t exhibited anything truly unique or inspiring for ages. If you peek under the carpet of the music game genre, however, you can find some interesting, clever or just plain weird alternatives nestled amid the dust bunnies…

**Beatle Quest (1985, Commodore 64/ZX Spectrum)**

This classic (read: ancient) text adventure dishes up a futuristic scenario wherein you, as a keeper of the far future’s Archives, suddenly find yourself in a computer-simulated world inspired by the Beatles' best works. You’d better have a good imagination though, as there are no visual aids here—exploring the world wholly relies on navigating roads and environments made entirely out of the Beatles’ lyrics.

**Prince Interactive (1994, Windows/Mac)**

Trust the Artist Formerly Known As The Artist Formerly Known As Prince to come up with a game that’s as pretentious as he is. Prince Interactive is an adventure game in the vein of Myst that also doubles as a kind of virtual tour through Prince’s Paisley Park Studios. And, like the man himself, the game is a befuddling jumble of puzzles that few people will truly understand (although to be fair, it’s nowhere near as short).

**Peter Gabriel: EVE (1996, Windows/Mac)**

EVE represented the second in ultra-prolific songwriter Peter Gabriel’s experimental blends of art and music (with the first being Xplora, more a collection of audio/visual oddities than an actual game). Of course, the game’s vague allusions to comprehending the relationship between man, woman and nature revealed that Gabriel’s pretentious nature wasn’t limited to his musical works alone, since it’s basically an overgrown picture book for 21st century New Age holdouts. Think Myst meets mescaline with spectacular results.

**Devo Presents Adventures Of The Smart Patrol (1996, Windows)**

Roll up, roll up! Come see the oddity that is ‘80s new wave music bred with a storyline about the countdown to apocalypse! As surreal as it is almost unplayable, there’s no denying that Devo’s game matches their music perfectly. If you’ve ever wanted to see what a turkey crossed with a monkey looks like though, play this one long enough to get a good look at the bizarre antagonist of Adventures Of The Smart Patrol. (Warning: Turkey Monkey does not look like a turkey or a monkey and is bound to set you up for disappointment…)

**Queen: The eYe (1998, Windows)**

While it may have been shipped with five discs of remixed Queen tracks, The eYe was anything but up to the quality of Freddy Mercury’s singing. In fact, the dated visuals and frankly terrible action/adventure gameplay put it as a title that we suspect maker Electronic Arts would like to forget it published. Still, the story—an all-seeing machine called The eYe—wipes out creative expression, until a secret agent rediscovers rock music and does everything he can to destroy the machine—came in useful, since many of the ideas it delivered appear to have been repurposed to create the hit musical We Will Rock You.

**Dance Dance Revolution: Mario Mix (2005, GameCube)**

Despite its upbeat Japanese pop-inspired music and flashy cotton candy-colored backgrounds, the Dance Dance Revolution series is far more normal than some of the offerings on this list. That said, the Mario Mix edition of the game stands out as distinctly unusual. After all, Mario’s already proven he can outsmart Bowser with everything from fireballs and head stomps to hammers, bombs and even anti-gravity. Why would the two ever resort to a dance-off in order to resolve their differences?

**Osu! Tatakae! Ouendan! (2005, Nintendo DS)**

When developer iNiS’s quirky beat-matching game hit Japanese shores in 2005, we never imagined that it was grounded in real life. Trios of dancing men in black trenchcoats, dishing out encouragement like crazy cheerleaders to people from all walks of life? Hilarious! Of course, that was before we knew such groups actually existed… not that it reduced our enjoyment of the toe-tapping J-Pop beats or the challenge of hitting numbered blobs in time with the music. Consider it one of those ‘simple to play, tough to master’ games that, thanks to a cult following, gathered enough steam to make it to western shores (albeit in the rather more conservative guise of Elite Beat Agents).

**Eternal Sonata (2007, Xbox 360/PlayStation 3)**

The Xbox 360 has always been a bit light on Japanese fantasy role-playing games, so the release of Eternal Sonata sparked intrigue from the very beginning. We got even more excited when we learned that the game’s story is essentially a fever-dream in the mind of Polish pianist Frédéric Chopin, who died of tuberculosis at the age of 39. We can never know for sure what goes on in the brain of a musical genius, but if we’re to believe Eternal Sonata, it looks like there’s a lot of rich piano music, monsters and a whole lot of angst-ridden dialogue.
SINGSTAR
From: Sony Computer Entertainment America
Released: 2001

Behind The Music: Although a largely copycat product, Sony’s answer to Karaoke Revolution—with its USB microphones allowing players to sing along to on-screen lyrics—still remains popular in the US, where it recently made the jump to PS3. However, the franchise is a veritable juggernaut in Europe, with a whopping 70 different releases (including pop, R&B, and ‘90s editions) spanning multiple languages, custom set lists individualized by territory and even tributes to iconic bands such as Queen and ABBA.

Why It Rocks: SingStar elegantly demonstrates how music universally translates across nationalities and cultures as a medium for both entertainment and play, ensuring the topic’s continued exploration by software makers. The series also scores bonus points awarded for being the first game to sport a Bollywood edition.

Did You Know… ABBA and Take That may be popular, but the very first artist-specific version of SingStar was actually dedicated to a German punk band called Die Toten Hosen. Never heard of them? Until you’ve sung Hier Kommt Alex in just your underwear at 2am, you haven’t lived.

BRITNEY’S DANCE BEAT
From: THQ
Released: 2002

Behind The Music: Before the child-endangerable breakdown. Heck, even before Lufti and Federline. Rewind the tape to 2002 and Britney—then Forbes’ most powerful celebrity—was at the peak of her singing/songwriting career, enjoying breezy paydays like this quickly-forgettable timed button-bashing outing, featuring tracks such as “Oops! I Did It Again” and “Slave 4 U.”

Why It Rocks: Like earlier fan-service specials such as *NSYNC Hotline Fantasy Phone and CD-ROM Game, this gave closet Stans an interactive means to obsess over their favorite chart-topper… albeit as the first game to feature former jailbait.

Did You Know… If you want to blame anyone for Britney’s Dance Beat, blame Enix (yes, the same Enix that created timeless fantasy dungeon crawl Dragon Quest and merged with Square in 2003), since the game was made using a modified version of its Bust-A-Groove engine. Indirect, sure, but still blame-worthy.

GUITAROO MAN
From: Koei
Released: 2002

Behind The Music: It’s a classic tale: boy loves girl, boy fails to get girl, boy meets dog, boy turns out to be last of an alien race and uses guitar skills to save the rest of his people from evil kidnappers. What, you’ve never heard it before? In any case, Guitaroo Man earned its spot as a cult game not just through its excellent gameplay, but because Koei only printed a limited number of discs—when the game got rave reviews and people tried to buy it, they couldn’t find it anywhere. Cue the game becoming super-rare and fetching a pretty penny on Internet auction sites… at least until Sony re-released it on the PSP, anyway.

Why It Rocks: Pressing buttons in time to the beat was old hat by the time Guitaroo Man came out thanks to the likes of PaRappa The Rapper, but Koei’s game did things differently. For starters, note buttons came in from multiple directions, meaning you had to have sharp reflexes to keep up. On top of that though, each song had multiple stages—some phases saw you taking energy from your opponent with successful button presses, others had you defending to conserve your own energy and others still let you charge energy for big attacks. Combine all this with an awesome rock soundtrack and it made for a fantastic musical experience.

Did You Know... Guitaroo Man was the very first title to be developed by iNiS, who went on to create the *Osu*! Tatakae! Ouendan!, Elite Beat Agents and Lips musical videogames.

MAD MAESTRO
From: Eidos
Released: 2002

Behind The Music: File this one under ‘Quirky Japanese Rhythm Action’—Mad Maestro had you, as heroic conductor Takt, using your amazing conducting skills to inspire the townsfolk of Bravo Town with a selection of classical music. In reality, that meant pressing buttons in time with the music as notations appeared on screen… just your average day in the world of rhythm action gaming.

Why It Rocks: The unique element of Mad Maestro came through the use of the analogue buttons on the PlayStation 2’s controller. Notes that appeared on screen not only indicated which button to press, but also how hard to press them based on their volume—the louder the note, the harder you had to press it. Unfortunately, gauging this pressure wasn’t exactly easy and so it increased the difficulty of the game greatly. Still, it was a neat idea and a nice example of innovation in the genre.

Did You Know… Mad Maestro may have been one of the first rhythm action games to venture into the realm of classical music, but it wasn’t the last. Looney Tunes: Cartoon Conductor on the Nintendo DS saw you conducting the score of various famous Looney Tunes cartoons (including the famous “What’s Opera, Doc?”) using numbered blobs in the same vein as Elite Beat Agents.
**DJMAX**

*From: Neowiz Games*

*Released: 2004*

*Behind The Music: They say that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery; if that’s true, then DJMax must love Beatmania to bits. Created originally as a browser-based game that featured highly experimental music from a range of Korean musicians and DJs, the franchise has since grown into something of a monster… in South Korea and Japan, anyway.*

*Why It Rocks: Essentially, it’s as mad as a box of frogs. The notes are all over the shop, doing well at the game seems to require some kind of sixth sense and four thumbs (unless you play on the easiest setting, in which case you can get away with just hitting the same two buttons over and over) and the music is eclectic to say the least.*

*Did You Know… Of all the games in the DJMax series (14 in total at time of writing), only one of them has a space in between the words DJ and Max. That game? DJ Max Fever for the PlayStation Portable, the only version of the game available in the west.*

**TAIKO DRUM MASTER**

*From: Namco*

*Released: 2004*

*Behind The Music: Certainly, the original arcade version of Taiko No Tatsujin (as it was known in Japan upon arriving in 2001) was hard to miss; two gigantic Japanese Taiko drums bolted onto a massive frame, with the idea being to pound on those skins and rims as real Taiko drummers would depending on the color of the icons that scroll across the screen. A red blob means hitting the drum in the middle, while a blue one requires a tap on the rim (although there are others that require drum rolls too) and hitting them as the markers reach the line on the left in time with the music yields the best results. Not surprisingly, the home versions don’t come with a full-blown Taiko drum, but you do get a TaTaCon—short for Taiko Tapping Controller, a mini drumskin with two small pounding sticks—for your trouble.*

*Why It Rocks: If you can’t love the drumdogs that act as mascots for the series (and let’s face it, they’re cute as hell), then there’s always the great rhythm gameplay and a wide variety of tunes to fall back on. Plus, the TaTaCon controller is pretty damn cool—a bit plastic, sure, but still cool.*

*Did You Know… There have been over 40 versions of the game released in Japan and its surrounding Asian countries—however, only one version has ever been released in the west, arriving in 2004.*
DONKEY KONGA
From: Nintendo
Released: 2004
Behind The Music: Created by Namco (who had previous experience in drum gaming thanks to Taiko Drum Master), Nintendo’s decision to release a game requiring bespoke drum controllers was surprising to say the least. Of course, that didn’t stop us having a whale of a time bashing along to the beats on our prized Bongo Drums. Colored dots corresponding to different sides of the drum (left, right or both) moved along a track, with the player having to hit the relevant drum as the mark passed a certain point. There was also a ‘clap’ marker, requiring you to clap loudly over the drum so that the built-in microphone could pick up the sound.

Why It Rocks: It’s a game packed with ridiculous music that uses Bongo Drums and features giant monkeys—anyone who claims not to love it is either a liar or dead inside.

Did You Know… Only one other game besides the Donkey Konga series that was designed to be used with the Bongo Drum controller came out: Donkey Kong Jungle Beat. Interestingly, it wasn’t a music game but rather a platform adventure, making the use of the drums rather unique. Another game, Donkey Kong Barrel Blast, was planned, but Nintendo eventually moved it to the Wii and substituted drum controls for the Wii Remote and Nunchuk.

SNOOP DOGG BOXING
From: Blue Heat
Released: 2004
Behind The Music: Years before the iPhone became ubiquitous and made mobile gaming an industry watchword, the eternally blunt-scented West Coast rider turned reality TV star and youth football coach landed in a Punch Out!! clone for cellular phones with knockout results. Interestingly, the near-ubiquitous rhyme-spitter also doubles as the last opponent players get to beat the living gin-and-juice out of.

Why It Rocks: Looking back, it helped establish the pop culture-skewering mold that would define many mobile celebrity cash-ins to come, including Lil’ Jon Crunk Golf. Thankfully, this trend has since by supplanted by hits that focus more on gameplay and less on gimmicks, such as Riddim Ribbon and Tap Tap Revenge.

Did You Know… This wasn’t the only time that Snoop Dogg would turn up as the ‘end boss’ of a videogame. He also appeared as Crow, the ruthless gangster trying to take over the New York underground in Def Jam: Fight For New York.
Michael Jackson

Space Channel 5 and Space Channel 5 Part 2 (2000, 2003 / Dreamcast)
Jackson’s video game legacy ranges from loud and proud (MJ: The Experience, Moonwalker) to shrouded and mysterious—it’s highly likely he contributed music to Sonic the Hedgehog 3 for the Genesis, though nobody can confirm which pieces he composed. (His name was dropped from the credits and we’ll never know if that happened because of the controversy that dogged him from the ’90s, or if he really did hate the sound of his music converted into chiptune form.) In the Space Channel 5 games though, Jacko appeared as ‘Space Michael,’ with his in-game model being capable of busting some familiar moves. Despite the tinfoil suit and vampire-pale skin though, his cameo is actually one of the least surprising on this list—he really did fit the role of a dancing space guy as snugly as a key in a lock. That’s not a jab… that’s just Michael.

David Bowie

Granted, Bowie’s appearance in Quantic Dream’s Blade Runner-esque adventure wasn’t entirely surprising, since he had some input on the game’s design and story, as well as writing much of the game’s music. Still, we doubt anyone expected him to pop up twice as different characters: once as Bok, a renegade on the run from Omikron’s oppressive government, then again as the lead singer of The Dreamers, a band that perform illegal concerts singing songs of revolution. On the plus side, everyone raved about Bowie’s contribution to the game… shame the rest of the reviews were pretty mixed.

Phil Collins

Grand Theft Auto: Vice City Stories (2006 / PSP)
The Grand Theft Auto series has spoofed its share of celebrities, and it was only a matter of time before some savvy genius showed up for real to collect a bit of extra notoriety. The first celebrity up to the plate? Phil Collins. Okay… well, it’s a start. Finding him is simple enough too: cough up $6,000 for a ticket (!) and you can attend a Phil Collins’ concert where he sings In the Air Tonight uninterrupted. Good thing too—for that price, he’d better hold it in instead of pausing for a bathroom break.

The Devil

Guitar Hero III (2007 / Various Consoles)
Staring dark guitarist Lou (last name: Sifer) down over a rock rendition of “The Devil Went Down to Georgia” in Guitar Hero III is fun indeed. Why is that a surprise cameo though? Well, there may be a rumor going around that Satan does his dirty work through rock music, but the truth is that he usually doesn’t have time to touch the stuff. He has all-consuming wars to oversee! Dictators to advise! Famine and plaque to dole out! In other words, the Morning Star just happened to show up on the set of Guitar Hero III because he had a speck of spare time, which, for him, is rarer than a snowball on his front porch.

GUITAR HERO

From: RedOctane/Activision
Released: 2005

Behind The Music: Not heard of Guitar Hero? What planet have you been living on? It’s a $2 billion franchise that’s sold over 25 million units worldwide and spawned piles of spin-offs including dedicated tributes to bands like Aerosmith and Metallica, not to mention the likes of Band Hero and DJ Hero. The series also scored chart-topping adaptations for nearly every platform from Nintendo DS to mobile phones, once enjoyed a cult-like following amongst teens and twenty-somethings and even boasts entire South Park episodes devoted to its charms. That said then, you could be forgiven for forgetting that prior to launch, the dynamo which sparked an entire industry was once just a risky, unproven gamble from RedOctane, a little-known manufacturer of dance pad peripherals and dabbler in online video game rentals.

Why It Rocks: Without doubt, Guitar Hero turned the nation’s youth into drooling vidiots, single-handedly built today’s fastest-growing game category and potentially helped save rock through the sale of online music. But despite being directly responsible for the last decade’s fastest-growing (and, apparently, collapsing) gaming genre, the title once-hailed as the music industry’s possible savior has sadly been placed on temporary hiatus by now-owner Activision. While the publisher insists that reports of the franchise’s death have been greatly exaggerated though, it’s still sad to see the former king of the castle being left to rot in the dungeon. Thankfully, there’s still hope for a rebirth via online, social and downloadable platforms.

Did You Know… In a list of top grossing games published since 1995 released by NPD in March 2011, Guitar Hero 3: Legends Of Rock came out on top with life-to-date sales of $830.9 million—more than the Call of Duty games—and that’s not including revenues earned from additional downloadable content.
THE IDOLM@STER
From: Namco
Released: 2005
Behind The Music: Okay, so you’ve caught us out—technically, Idolm@ster isn’t a music game but rather a life simulation where you guide an idol (a young Japanese pop starlet) to success. Essentially, it’s a combination of mini-games, quiz-style communication sections and costume customization that help build up your idol’s stats, ultimately aiming to have her gain fans for her performance and climb the rankings. It does have rhythm action elements however, with the arcade version using touch-screen technology during audition training, and since each session of play ends with a musical song-and-dance number, it fits the music genre nicely. An added bonus comes from the fact that every Idolm@ster arcade machine is linked to a national network, meaning you’re actually competing with other players from all over the country (providing you’re in Japan, that is). It’s weird and slightly creepy, sure, but then most of the best games to come out of Japan usually are.

Why It Rocks: Since it launched, Idolm@ster has become to Japan what Guitar Hero became to the west. The game has touched society on so many levels, it’s scary—there are dedicated magazines showcasing idols, an anime that takes place in an alternate universe to the arcade game, CDs and DVDs of the music and more besides. Players even keep running diaries in their local arcades detailing their accomplishments and regularly cover areas of the arcade containing the machines with fan art of their creations. Like we said… slightly creepy.

Did You Know… You know how the Xbox 360 is basically considered a failure in Japan? Well, it’d be even more a failure if it wasn’t for its port of The Idolm@ster. Thanks to a combination of the Xbox 360 game’s popularity and abundance of downloadable content, the game is responsible for the highest ratio of Xbox Live Gold memberships to consoles sold in the entire world, as well as increasing the amount of Microsoft Points sold in Japan fourfold on the day it came out.

LUMINES
From: Ubisoft
Released: 2005
Behind The Music: Once upon a time, puzzle games were primarily either a) cutesy, doe-eyed cartoon affairs or b) shameless spin-offs of Tetris. Then came this entrancing PSP—and eventually Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3—effort from designer Tetsuya Mizuguchi (Space Channel 5, Rez) which demanded that you group colored squares set atop scintillating backgrounds before a screen-sweeping line synchronized to the beat of background music came and cleared them away.

Why It Rocks: Lumines brought the club experience home with its laser light show effects and pounding beats, showing how audio could enhance—and be actively incorporated—into nearly any play experience. Later hits such as Everyday Shooter and Every Extend Extra owe it an obvious debt of gratitude.

Did You Know… Lumines Live, the Xbox 360 version of the game, came under massive fire for the way it handled its distribution. Instead of offering the full game for a one-off payment, Ubisoft provided a base version with 12 ‘skins’ for 1200 Microsoft Points (around $15 US), then sold additional levels and content separately. Since buying all of it meant the full game cost more than it did on other formats, 360 owners weren’t happy…

BEATERATOR
From: Rockstar Games
Released: 2005
Behind The Music: Originally a web-based music sampling and sequencing tool that you can access via an Internet browser, uber-developer Rockstar Games (Grand Theft Auto, Midnight Club, Red Dead Redemption, etc.) released Beaterator to its fan community completely free. Whether a clever marketing ploy or sincere gesture of appreciation, the package was loaded with license-free loops and had no strings attached, meaning users were too busy doing their best Oakenfold impression to judge.

Why It Rocks: The high-tech equivalent of a dropping a mixtape or free iTunes single to keep one’s name hot in the streets, it offered fellow publishers a means to learn by example. The subsequent PlayStation Portable (PSP) version, developed in conjunction with hit wizard Timbaland, didn’t take off quite as much as it should, probably because you actually had to pay for the damn thing.

Did You Know… Rockstar actually started holding Beaterator parties in PlayStation Home (Sony’s PlayStation 3-based social gathering world) where it would play user-uploaded tracks for everyone to listen to.
**Elephant Beat Agents**
*From: Nintendo  
Released: 2006*

**Behind The Music:** Critics adored this rhythm-based game starring a team of quirky men in black who aid citizens by inspiring them via dance, with boogie sessions controlled via poking the DS’ touch-sensing screen as numbered buttons flash up in time to the music.

**Why It Rocks:** Outrageously flamboyant, the title—an Americanized take on Japan’s Osu! Tatakae! Ouendan! franchise which, if we’re honest, was far better thanks to its quirky J-Pop tunes and use of male cheerleaders in place of suited detectives—made the most imaginative use of featured tracks like “Material Girl” and “YMCA” we’ve ever witnessed.

**Did You Know…** Before becoming black-suited secret agents, the main characters in *Elite Beat Agents* were a trio of dancers modeled after three members of The Village People.

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**Electroplankton**
*From: Nintendo  
Released: 2006*

**Behind The Music:** When it first revealed *Electroplankton* to the world, many people thought Nintendo had gone crazy. Granted, the double whammy of the Nintendo DS and Wii, with their unique take on user input, already had people reeling…but music creation software that uses underwater creatures instead of traditional dials and sliders? Nope, that’s just ridiculous. And yet somehow, it worked—the ten unique methods of generating tunes, from spinning ring-shaped creatures and creating ripples to bouncing fish-like things off leaves that can be tipped to change the pitch, captivated people all over the world.

**Why It Rocks:** Unfortunately, the reason is purely because it proved that even the most experienced games publisher can screw the pooch if it doesn’t think things through properly. In the end, Nintendo couldn’t hide the one massive flaw in *Electroplankton*’s design—without a save option, its use as a music creation tool was pretty useless. But then, that’s exactly why one wasn’t included, since the developer wanted the player to enjoy their creations in the moment, rather than storing them up for later use.

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**Did You Know…** To prove its point about how *Electroplankton* was a worthy DS title, Nintendo had DJ David Holland ‘perform’ at the 2005 Electronic Entertainment Expo tradeshow using multiple copies of the game. To be fair, he was pretty impressive.

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**Traxxpad: Portable Studio**
*From: Eidos  
Released: 2007*

**Behind The Music:** A full-service suite of music creation tools designed for use on the PSP handheld including sequencers, drum machines and the ability to record audio snippets with the system’s built-in microphone, then export them to MP3 files.

**Why It Rocks:** Turned portable gamers into beatmakers overnight, and made it possible for them to produce tracks without having to lug along a bulky laptop while catching the downtown train.

**Did You Know…** On top of the 1,000+ samples already included in the software, Eidos teamed up with Sha Money XL (former president of G-Unit, 50 Cent’s hip-hop imprint) to deliver downloadable content and unique graphics for it.

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**Audition Online**
*From: Nexon  
Released: 2007*

**Behind The Music:** A Korean online dance simulator that’s accessible 24/7 totally gratis, where button-nosed anime avatars shake their moneymaker to Natasha Bedingfield, Backstreet Boys and Avril Lavigne in freestyle or synchronized routines to earn fresh shades and hairdos.

**Why It Rocks:** Because it’s free—*Audition* offers endless entertainment for the teen and tween set within a permanent cyberspace venue that costs zilch to jump right into and obsess like a schoolgirl over. We imagine it looks something like Gary Glitter’s ideal vision of Match.com.

**Did You Know…** Not surprisingly, *Audition* manages to stay free-to-play by offering totally optional micro-transactions (bite-sized virtual impulse buys) for players to purchase if they wish. Through the in-game shopping mall, you can customize the look of your character, and buy pets, guitars and other accessories.
The History of Music Games

MUSIKA
From: Sony BMG
Release: 2007
Behind The Music: PaRappa The Rapper creator Matsaya Matsuura strikes again, turning your iPod into an interactive visualizer. The experience in a nutshell: after tapping your music library to provide a soundtrack, random letters appear onscreen in increasingly graphically surreal ways. Players must then identify as quickly as possible if the letters are represented in the current song title—the more letters you get right in a row, the more bonuses and multipliers you build up.

Why It Rocks: An early iPod gaming effort, it pointed to the digital music player’s potential to deliver interactive entertainment, though few at the time could have suspected it would foreshadow Apple’s later dominance of the handheld and mobile gaming field.

Did You Know… Originally called Rhythmica, the entire game only requires one button to play. Quite a change from the crazy button pressing experiences that PaRappa The Rapper and Um Jammer Lammy were…

ROCK BAND
From: MTV Games
Release: 2007
Behind The Music: The first game to combine all aspects of the virtual music-making experience (singing, pounding drums, playing guitar or plucking bass) was also the initial offering to deliver peripherals for all (including microphone, plastic drum set and faux axe) in one kit. In total, over 100 million digital songs have been downloaded for the Rock Band family of games, with more than 2700 tracks from 900 artists including Metallica, The Ramones and Fleetwood Mac available across all retail and downloadable installments, including digital distribution platform the Rock Band Network. Thousands of masters, rerecordings or alternate tracks (all playable) by artists like Rush and Weezer, not to mention countless fans—who can perform as cohesive four-man bands online—should ensure that it remains the default house party icebreaker of choice for years to come.

Why It Rocks: Providing the now-defunct MTV Games a then-marquee entrée into the gaming universe, it also laid the foundations for groundbreaking tributes (The Beatles: Rock Band), cutting-edge online innovations (Rock Band Network) and future motion-controlled games (Dance Central) to come. Backed by the network’s cachet, Harmonix founders Alex Rigopulos and Eran Egozy were able to assemble what was once the greatest video game soundtrack ever, and snag a well-deserved slot on Time magazine’s 100 Most Influential People Of 2008.

Did You Know… The runaway success of Rock Band is obviously the downloadable content store, which, at its peak, was estimated to generate one million song downloads every nine days. An example of how popular it is can be seen in Motley Crüe’s Saints of Los Angeles—released as a single simultaneously on both the Rock Band Store and iTunes, first week sales were 34,000 higher in Rock Band’s favor. According to Harmonix, nearly 5 million people have downloaded songs from the Rock Band catalogue, and more than a million players still sign in each month to play the game and purchase new music.
THE HISTORY OF MUSIC GAMES

THE WORST MUSIC GAMES EVER

Like any marriage, the long and fruitful relationship that music and video games have enjoyed has had its rough patches; for every Guitar Hero-grade success story, there have been a dozen tone-deaf misfits that should never have been unleashed upon the world. Be warned, the games below should be approached with caution… if you want your eardrums to be left intact, that is.


Though Konami arguably brought band-based games to the world’s attention through brilliantly innovative offerings like Guitar Freaks and DrumMania, the company’s desperate attempt to cash in on Rock Band’s success is as surprising as it disappointing. Even worse, Rock Revolution’s 7-pad drum set also baffled the world, the game lacked guitar peripherals, and it featured graphics that made the Muppet-mouthed ‘singers’ from Guitar Hero III look like a technological triumph.

Power Gig: Rise Of The Six-String (2010, PS3/Xbox 360)

Released just as the vultures were beginning to circle the plastic-instrument-based genre, Power Gig’s big selling point was its authentic guitar peripheral that could supposedly help you learn how to play the real thing. Indeed, the guitar was technically real, but it was a slab of plastic junk that any guitar aficionado would be ashamed of. Even sadder still, the game was a standard Guitar Hero clone and did nothing to actually teach you how to handle a real axe.

Make My Video (1992, PC/Sega CD)

Drunk with the power of CD storage—capable of holding hundreds of times more audio/visual data than floppy disks, the previous computing medium du jour—gaming industry insiders sagely assumed that digitized video and interactive movies, versus, say, creativity and innovative gameplay, were the future. Case in point: these ultra-repetitive outings starring Kris Kross, Marky Mark and INXS, which let you remix the visual accompaniments of featured tracks by stringing together a limited array of grainy video clips. But while they may be more noteworthy today as technology experiments gone horribly wrong and kitschy pop culture footnotes, they’re also artifacts of a simpler, cheesier gaming era. For further pain, see Power Factory Featuring CB&C Music Factory, a game whose oddly lit, neo-industrial backdrops and diabolical close-up shots better suit a Saw flick than anything rated as suitable for consumption by Walkman-loving children. “Things That Make You Go Hmmm,” indeed.

Virtual VCR: The Color of Modern Rock (1992, Sega CD)

Nothing dates a game faster than a carton of milk stuck behind a furnace than putting the words ‘Virtual’ and ‘VCR’ together. Sadly, The Color of Modern Rock didn’t give users the dignity of controlling their own torture. Instead, all they could do was suffer through some grainy Eric Martin music videos and take screenshots for the purpose of… well, who the hell knows? Once again, the Sega CD explicitly demonstrated that video games and live-action FMV were never meant to go together, so thanks for taking that bullet, Sega.

Rap Jam: Volume 1 (1995, SNES)

Despite the misleading title, Rap Jam was actually an SNES-era basketball game that starred some of the biggest rappers and hip-hop groups from the ‘90s including House Of Pain, Coolio and Queen Latifah. Sadly for a title about fancy footwork on the court, the game played as if everyone was wearing ice-skates. What’s more, the background music was completely lacking; talk about a waste of Naughty By Nature. Still, things have a strange way of working out in end. After all, there was never a Volume 2…

Guitar Hero Encore: Rocks The ‘80s (2007, PlayStation 2)

Otherwise known as Guitar Hero: Where it All Started to Go Wrong, Rocks The ‘80s garnered a lot of criticism for charging full-price for what was essentially an expansion pack (and a lackluster one at that). In 2007, digital song downloads had yet to really take off, but even so, GH Encore: Rocks The ‘80s is a sign of what was to come for the franchise: overpriced and oversaturated, two of several key factors leading to its eventual downfall.

Dance Praise (2005, Mac/PC)

Considering that the Bible is stuffed with talking snakes, sex, genocide, destruction, and monsters that make Resident Evil’s slavering corpses look like extras on iCarly, there’s no reason why Christian video games shouldn’t be brilliant. Unfortunately, the opposite often tends to be true: these games generally tend to be weak alternatives to religiously agnostic outings. One such example is Dance Praise, a rhythm game based on Dance Dance Revolution. Not only was the game derivative and insultingly easy, but the music was sanitized in order to be appropriate for “young Christian ears.” To quote Bart Simpson: “Everyone knows that the best bands are affiliated with Satan.”
THE HISTORY OF MUSIC GAMES

**PHASE: YOUR MUSIC IS THE GAME**
From: Harmonix
Released: 2007

*Behind The Music:* Imagine if the people who created *Amplitude, Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band* made an iPod game that used your own music library to generate the same kind of beat-matching gameplay that made *Guitar Hero* so much fun. Now check that you own an iPod Classic—if you do, you can stop imagining and pick up a copy of *Phase: Your Music Is the Game* from iTunes instead.

*Why It Rocks:* *Phase* essentially did the one thing that everyone has wanted *Rock Band* to do ever since—take literally any song they fancy and, by using beat-tracking technology, turn it into a track that they can play. Sadly, the game never made it beyond being available for the classic iPod due to it using dial-based controls. Harmonix suggested it might look into creating a version for the iPod Touch, but never got around to it (probably because it brought *Rock Band*, complete with its paid-for downloadable tracks, to Apple devices instead).

*Did You Know...* The maximum length of a *Phase* song—that is to say, any song you choose to import into the game through iTunes—is 30 minutes. Our favorite is * Providence* by Godspeed You! Black Emperor, which clocks in at 29:02… makes our fingers hurt though.

**AUDIOSURF**
From: Audiosurf LLC
Released: 2008

*Behind The Music:* A hugely popular independent downloadable outing (available via online retailers such as Steam) that splits the difference between rhythm, racing and puzzle-based play.

*Why It Rocks:* Much like Harmonix’s *Phase: Your Music Is the Game*, Audiosurf turns your collection of DRM-free digital music into unique challenges, with each song presenting new tracks, timing to master and score-boosting collectible blocks. Like a cross between *Guitar Hero* and futuristic speedster *WipEout*, it’s easy to learn but tremendously difficult to master and sports that intangible quality that demands ‘just one more go…’

*Did You Know...* Thanks to its appearance as the third game released on Valve’s Steam online download service, *Audiosurf* came packaged with the entire *Orange Box* soundtrack for users to play with.

**WII MUSIC**
From: Nintendo
Released: 2008

*Behind The Music:* Players could conduct orchestras or coax sweet nothings from over 60 instruments—bongos, maracas, guitars, violins, pianos, even cowbells—by physically manipulating the Wii remote, nunchuk controller and balance board controllers in all manner of different ways.

*Why It Rocks:* Beyond bringing motion sensitivity to the genre (well, beyond the already-famous ‘tilt for Star Power’ from *Guitar Hero/Rock Band*), *Wii Music* also offers of the broadest ranges of musical applications for the technology ever. It additionally proved that classic music could hold its own against more contemporary fare as well, and further cemented the Wii’s long-running romance with quirky, sonically-inclined titles like *Just Dance* and *Major Minor’s Majestic March*.

*Did You Know...* DJ Ravi Drums has worked as the personal DJ of Playboy founder, Hugh Hefner. Not sure what connects him to *Wii Music*? Do a search for ‘Ravi Drums’ on Google and check out the video that comes up. Yep, THAT’S why everyone thought *Wii Music* was going to be a joke before it even came out…

**TAP TAP REVENGE**
From: Tapulous
Released: 2008

*Behind The Music:* The iPhone *Guitar Hero* clone that spawned a dynasty, leading to tens of millions of downloads, numerous sequels for iPad and iPod touch (*Linkin Park Revenge, Katy Perry Revenge, Riddim Ribbon* and more beside) and creator Tapulous’ subsequent purchase by Disney.

*Why It Rocks:* *Tap Tap* may have been the first major beachhead in music gaming’s war to become a mobile, online and social gaming staple, and has rapidly become a torch-bearer for where the genre will potentially head going forward.

*Did You Know...* The very first *Tap Tap* game, called *Tap Tap Revolution*, was developed by one person—Nate True—in just two days and was created independently from Apple’s iPhone development kit, meaning only people who’d jailbroken their phones could play it.
KORG DS-10
From: XSEED Games
Released: 2008
Behind The Music: Where Electroplankton was a rather artsy take on handheld music creation, KORG DS-10 didn’t mess about with what it could do. It’s a KORG synthesizer, plain and simple—several of them, in fact, since the full range of KORG monophonic synths were emulated, as well as options that the range didn’t have. Knowledge of how KORGs worked obviously worked in the user’s favor, but that didn’t make it impossible to come up with interesting tuneage just by fiddling around with the numerous dials and other gizmos. In fact, random self-discovery actually made it more fun, since you never really knew what you were going to make next.

Why It Rocks: It perfectly recreated the functionality of a full-sized KORG device in your pocket… what’s not to love about it? Plus, it has an option called Flanger, which makes us laugh. Every game released from now on should have a Flanger.

Did You Know… An upgraded DSI-compatible version called KORG DS-10 Plus came out in the US in February 2010, offering twice as many synth and drum machine options.

GUITAR HERO: WORLD TOUR
From: Activision
Released: 2008
Behind The Music: While Guitar Hero III was a retail pinnacle for the series, this follow-up trumped it conceptually by offering players personalized song creation tools (albeit offering instrumental tracks only) and options to share custom-built tracks online.

Why It Rocks: World Tour was the first Guitar Hero to cram in support for microphone and drum peripherals—in direct answer to rival Rock Band—providing the ability to quickly construct your own shred-ready spin on “Smells Like Teen Spirit,” “Miss Murder” or other favorite staples, then watch as peers vote it to the top of weekly rankings, turning you into an overnight sensation. Well, maybe.

Did You Know… Until it was added into the mix for World Tour, the drum portion of the game was actually being developed as its own product (not surprisingly named Drum Hero). With Rock Band offering a complete package though, Activision decided to merge it with the then-named Guitar Hero IV instead.

ROCK BAND 2
From: MTV Games/Electronic Arts
Released: 2008
Behind The Music: Harmonix’s inevitable follow-up retooled and enhanced the original’s celebrated features, (including its jack-of-all-trades musical mentality, Internet readiness and stellar song library) in hopes of gaining additional ground on its more widely-recognized and well-established nemesis, Guitar Hero. Highlights include individualized character creation complete with the ability to buy real-life posters and figurines featuring your fictional group; Battle of the Bands scenarios; signature tracks like Bob Dylan’s “Tangled Up in Blue” and debut Chinese Democracy cut “Shackler’s Revenge,” revamped controllers (with drum cymbals costing extra); and compatibility with previously-purchased songs to the point that you could import virtually all the tunes from the original Rock Band.

Why It Rocks: It may have mostly been more of the same, but expanded virtual touring options, an exclusive appearance by AC/DC, added multiplayer thrills and a constant stream of weekly downloadable album and track expansions ensured it resonated with the fan base. More importantly though, Rock Band 2 carried the torch for a new generation of music-based titles and, given the heated competition with Activision, promised endless weeks of productivity-crushing thrills.

Did You Know… As a sign of things to come on the ‘premium’ instrument front, Ion Audio created the Drum Rocker for Rock Band 2—a completely adjustable professional electronic drum kit with two cymbals (upgradable to three), full metal bass pedal (upgradable to two) and the ability to work as a standalone drum kit with over 500 realistic drum and cymbal sounds. Not surprisingly, it retailed at $299.99. Ouch.
THE HISTORY OF MUSIC GAMES

LIPS
From: Microsoft
Released: 2008
Behind The Music: Coming from the same developer as Elite Beat Agents (NiSiS), Microsoft’s answer to SingStar was... well, okay. That it so closely aped Sony’s effort made it more of an ‘also ran’ as opposed to anything truly unique, although the fact that it supports the ability to use any song held on an iPod or Zune (Microsoft’s failed answer to Apple’s ubiquitous digital music player) was novel at least. Like SingStar, Microsoft regularly releases new downloadable content for the game through the Xbox Live Marketplace, as well as releasing standalone versions localized for the country that it went on sale in.

Why It Rocks: Two words—glowing microphones. Microsoft created special wireless microphones for LIPS with lights on them that pulsed and flashed along with your singing, which was a nice touch. Unfortunately, its determination to hog all the good ideas meant that the mics didn’t work with any other music games, leading to users airing their frustrations all over the Internet. A patch was soon put in place and now every title from Guitar Hero to Rock Band supports the rather nifty wireless devices.

Did You Know... In October 2009, Microsoft teamed up with CrystalRoc (a company specializing in creating instruments inlayed with Swarovski crystals) to create a limited run of 1,000 microphones with Xillion Rose crystals set around the base of the mic grill. Each pair of mics cost a staggering $680... although the pretty carrying case came free.

JAM WITH THE BAND
From: Nintendo
Released: 2008 (2010 in Europe)
Behind The Music: Scrolling note scores? Check. Buttons corresponding to notes that have to be hit? Check. A wide range of tracks to play along to? Check and check. But while portable Nintendo DS outing Jam With the Band (also known as Daigasso! Band Brothers) might sound like Guitar Hero, its intuitive controls and quirky stylings, not to mention the wide range of instruments that you could play besides the guitar, made it so much more.

Why It Rocks: Over 60 different instruments to play? Totally free downloadable content numbering over 4,000 tracks? Scaling difficulties that range from simple button presses to insane multi-input tracks that are nigh-on impossible to keep up with? These are the things that make portable music games truly awesome. Players could even link it to their Wii using a special downloadable channel to transmit their music through their televisions, meaning everyone in earshot could hear you butchering the classics.

Did You Know... Sadly, Jam With the Band never came out in the US. If any game gives you an excuse to import yourself a DS game from Europe, it’s this one.

JUST DANCE
From: UbiSoft
Released: 2009
Behind The Music: Family-friendly gameplay, idiot-proof controls and an innocuous ‘best of’ style pop/dance soundtrack propelled what’s otherwise a critically-panned dancing simulation (average Metacritic rating: 49 out of 100) for the Wii’s gesture-tracking remote to household name status.

Why It Rocks: Shockingly, its 4.3 million-strong sales—a testament to the power of suburbia’s fascination with Top 40 radio and harmless hip-waggling fun—have made it the second-highest selling Wii game not published by Nintendo. Top honors, naturally, are reserved for its 5 million-selling 2010 sequel, Just Dance 2, with Ubisoft planning to get its money’s worth from the franchise for many years to come.

Did You Know... The game that suffered the utter humiliation of being knocked from the top of the chart by Just Dance? That would be Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare 2, which had previously been at number one for nine weeks. Oh, the humanity.
It’s difficult to get a solid consensus about the state of music games in the post-Guitar Hero era. Some people insist that music and rhythm games were around long before instrument-based video games became a phenomenon, meaning they’ll continue to exist in some form, while others believe that music games have had it. Realistically though, what does the future hold for music games? We’re not psychic, but going by past trends, we can take an educated stab at what you’ll be singing along to on your Wii U, PlayStation 4 and Xbox 720 video game systems in the coming years…

Music Creation and Editing
One of the unsung features of the Nintendo 3DS is its built-in and easy-to-use sound editing software. You can record sounds (or use your totally legal MP3 library) and tinker with the speed and pitch to create something unique. You can also add effects, record the whole mess and distribute it to your friends, as you could with entire songs in Guitar Hero: World Tour (since its built-in music studio also let you upload and share new tracks for online distribution). Given the industry’s fascination with user-generated content, we’ll probably see more similar music editing programs like these and Rockstar’s popular Beaterator titles in the near future. Indeed, just recently, Nintendo said not to count out the Wii Music franchise, so the possibility of seeing yet more non-traditional music genres in games (such as classical, jazz and soft rock) making a comeback is still very real.

Fewer Plastic Instrument Peripherals
The era of plastic guitars is temporarily over, as far as we can tell. For a few years, people were very impressed by the sight of an entire arena’s worth of faux instruments (drums, microphones and guitars) in their living rooms. Now though, plastic accessories conjure mutters of doubt, cynicism and lamentations of ‘Where would I even put this?’ And with the Guitar Hero series temporarily benched in favor of focusing on downloadable songs and mobile or social gaming experiences, instrument-based peripherals bring to mind another thought: “Why bother?” Though they’ll potentially live on, new releases from plastic turntables to ukeleles should be much fewer and far between in the near-future, with hopefully more innovation in hardware with each successive release helping to rekindle interest and justify their higher asking prices.

Motion-Sensing, Real-World and Active Games
Franchises such as Dance Dance Revolution will continue to exist, as dance pads are pretty easy to fold up, tuck away or slide under the couch. However, the success of Kinect’s motion-sensing dance simulator Dance Central and the continued popularity of UbiSoft’s Just Dance series for the Wii indicate that people are presently more interested in getting off the couch and shaking their groove thang. Titles such as motion-tracking dance and karaoke game Michael Jackson: The Experience or those like Rocksmith—which let you play on real guitars—dominate going forward? That remains to be seen. But given the active gaming possibilities gesture-monitoring accessories like the PlayStation Move offer by letting players literally get in the game, we wouldn’t bet against it.

Online, Social and Mobile Play
Given a decline in sales of expensive plastic peripherals and associated music game bundles, it’s safe to assume that we’re not going to see nearly as many music games at retail stores as we did from 2005 through 2011—no doubt a lot of furious note-taking was done on the day Guitar Hero “died.” But with a growing shift in player interest towards the ability to download, access and play games on mobile devices like smartphones and tablet PCs, plus web browsers and social networks, great expansion will doubtless occur in these areas going forward. From iPhone and iPad outings such as the popular Tap Tap Revenge series to digital downloads like Audiosurf and Facebook offerings (for instance Recordshop Tycoon or Nightclub City), the fat lady hasn’t sung for the music and rhythm gaming genre yet. Like many other entertainment mediums, it’s just making the transition to online and Internet-connected digital experiences.

Downloadable Content (DLC) and Digital Add-Ons
Franchises like Guitar Hero, DJ Hero and Rock Band are presently laying fairly low at retail, focusing instead on pushing digital song downloads, which offer fans greater value and manufacturers’ bigger profit margins over expensive physical goods. After all, the instrument-based music genre still has its fans; how else are house parties supposed to get off the ground? Downloadable content is already proving to be a growing boon for the field, allowing you to extend the lifespan of any game infinitely with value-priced online purchases and optional expansions or feature add-ons. Discounted band sets will doubtless also prove a very tempting purchase to both families looking to do something fun together and audiophiles simply hoping to expand their interactive music collection. Helping sustain interest in the field and keep top artists and franchises fresh in people’s minds, DLC continues to keep the dream alive until the timing for a plastic-instrument-based genre reunion tour is right.
THE BEATLES: ROCK BAND
From: MTV Games
Released: 2009
Behind The Music: A groundbreaking collaboration between music channel MTV, leading developer Harmonix, Apple Corps and surviving members of the Beatles camp (including Paul McCartney, Ringo Starr, George Harrison’s wife/son Olivia and Dani, and hanger-on Yoko Ono), this was to be interactive entertainment’s Abbey Road. Sadly, despite launching to widespread critical acclaim and sporting dizzying production values, family-friendly play and dozens of definitive, career-spanning songs from “A Hard Day’s Night” to “Can’t Buy Me Love,” it struggled to go multiplatinum. Harmonix had hoped to single-handedly grow the size of the music game market with it, but it failed to move both Baby Boomers and Gen X/Yers en masse compared with previous titles. That said, it remains a fan favorite and well-respected testament to the best the genre has to offer.

Why It Rocks: It’s the ultimate tribute, packed full of loving care and attention—there’s previously unheard studio asides of the boys talking before many of the tracks, and each song has its own unique setting that just screams the Beatles style from the time. It was also the first Rock Band title to introduce three-way harmonies on the vocals and, if you were so inclined, you could use the in-built drum trainer to learn just how Ringo managed to do the things he do… er, did.

Did You Know… Ringo Starr’s unique drumming ability was made possible thank to the fact that he’s ambidextrous. If you’re not, consider the Expert drums of The Beatles: Rock Band off-limits… unless you like failure, of course.

RHYTHM HEAVEN
From: Nintendo
Released: 2009
Behind The Music: Although the original Rhythm Tengoku for the Game Boy Advance never made it out of Japan, cult success for the DS follow-up saw it make the migration onto western shores in 2009. Replacing the first game’s one-button gameplay with touch-based controls involving tapping, flicking and holding the stylus on the lower screen, players had to match rhythms as closely as possible to score the highest ranking in a number of musical tracks. Stages include singing Easter Island statues, clapping monkeys, synchronized swimmers, Russian military storks and choir singers with gigantic mouths… and no, we haven’t been smoking anything.

Why It Rocks: Like many music titles, Rhythm Heaven’s got that fantastic ‘just one more go’ hook that mixes perfectly with the ‘easy to learn, tough to master’ gameplay. And believe us, getting a perfect run—where you hit every beat in a song perfectly without missing once—is tough in the extreme. It took us forever to get that second Robot Factory level done...

Did You Know… The threshold for failure on Rhythm Heaven’s ‘perfect’ runs is horribly high. Miss any beat by 1/60th of a second and you’re out… at least until you try again.

DJ HERO
From: Activision
Released: 2009
Behind The Music: Never has the phrase ‘spin-off’ been more apt—DJ Hero took the foundations laid by Guitar Hero and applied them to the art of the disc jockey. Nearly 100 remixes, mash-ups and other tracks brought multiple tunes together, with players having to push buttons, move a cross-fader and scratch the custom-made plastic turntable controller in order to score points. True, it didn’t look as complex as the guitar game (it only had three colored streams instead of five), but then appearances were more than a little deceptive...

Why It Rocks: Besides taking a successful formula and doing something interesting with it, you can now pick up a full controller with the original game (or even the sequel) for less than a third of what it originally retailed for. Thanks to the franchise failing to do anywhere near as well as Activision hoped—a problem it blamed on the flagging music game market, not on the fact that it had managed to create yet another $100+ product for people to buy—anyone with a bit of shop savvy can find the entire package for hardly any money these days. Shame, really, but then we’re not complaining.

Did You Know… Despite sales falling well short of what Activision expected, the publisher still claimed that DJ Hero was the highest grossing new intellectual property (IP) of 2009. Of course, when your game’s selling for $120 a pop, that’s not surprising; even low sales would have meant it made a ton of cash...
THE HISTORY OF MUSIC GAMES

MAJOR MINOR’S MAJESTIC MARCH

From: Majesco Entertainment
Released: 2009

Behind The Music: Major Minor once again brought together musical genius Masaya Matsuura and graphic art expert Rodney Greenblat (having previously worked together on PaRappa The Rapper and Um Jammer Lammy) and saw the player help the titular Major command a continually growing marching band. Using the Wii Remote as a baton, you had to swing it in time with the music while avoiding obstacles and convincing new members—each with their own unique instruments that affected the music being played—to join the march. It sounded great before it arrived, but sadly it didn’t hold up once the game was released.

Why It Rocks: Sadly, it stands as a shining example (along with the likes of the Wii version of Samba De Amigo) of how the Wii Remote isn’t a great control method for making a rhythm action game. Since Nintendo’s controller is somewhat limited in how it can detect the player’s movements, rapid jerky motions are the last thing it should be used to track…and yet that’s exactly what Major Minor demanded, rendering the controls completely useless. No wonder it’s only got a Metacritic average review score rating of 46…

Did You Know… Despite having a huge legacy preceding it in the form of PaRappa The Rapper, members of the online press reported that Matsuura-san’s first Wii game only sold 600 copies in its first two days of release. The phrase ‘epic fail’ never seemed so apt, except for one small catch: A representative from creator NanaOn-Sha claims that the story isn’t true. “It was a classic case of a blog taking a dubious source and turning it into fact in order to sensationalize,” he says, admitting that “we never found out how many sold—only the publisher knows that.”

DEF JAM RAPSTAR

From: 4mm Games
Released: 2010

Behind The Music: Succeeding where earlier rap-based karaoke efforts such as Get On Da Mic failed, Def Jam Rapstar made rapping along with tracks by Drake, Lil’Wayne and The Notorious B.I.G. realistic, enjoyable and socially acceptable in shared company.

Why It Rocks: One of the first games to pay proper respect to hip-hop culture, it eschewed earlier outings’ such as Def Jam: Icon and Wu-Tang: Shaolin Style’s gonzo fighting elements to focus instead on beats and rhymes. That MCs could also share videos of freestyle battles online was simply an added bonus, helping aspiring lyricists the world over step up their game by schooling Internet haters with witty one-liners and quirky couplets.

Did You Know… The game had four different track lists depending on which version you bought—the US and UK versions had ten differences (with the UK one adding in the likes of Dizzee Rascal and Tinchy Stryder), while the German and French versions included seven unique tracks each.

DANCE CENTRAL

From: MTV Games
Released: 2010

Behind The Music: Does for dancing games what Rock Band did for music games (which is to say, it totally redefined how we saw them). Of course, much of that’s down to Microsoft’s Kinect peripheral, for which Dance Central was a leading launch title—the motion-tracking camera meant players could do away with dance mats, waggle controllers and other things that were previously required for dancing games, leaving them with just their bodies to do the poppin’ with. As the on-screen character performs moves, you simply replicate the move in time with the music…although as you might suspect, that makes the process sound far easier than it actually is.

Why It Rocks: Previously, dancing games didn’t actually require much dancing—the likes of Dance Dance Revolution hinged on hitting oversized buttons with your feet, while Just Dance could be played by any sofa simply by waving one arm around. Dance Central, however, doesn’t work unless you actually dance. Granted, that makes the level of challenge slightly higher, although there’s a fair amount of leeway allowed on the lower difficulties. That said though, even a few songs played back-to-back leave the average player sweating buckets—who said playing games wasn’t good for you?

Did You Know… Reggie Fils-Aime, Nintendo of America’s president, appears to be a fan of Dance Central, having cited it as ‘the best Kinect game’ in his opinion. We suspect he plays it in between kicking ass and taking names.
**ROCK BAND 3**
*From: MTV Games/Electronic Arts*
*Released: 2010*

**Behind The Music:** Easily the series' best installment, *Rock Band 3* adds more realistic 'Pro' instrument play to the mix (and by realistic, we mean a 102-button guitar simulating each possible chord combination) and support for a 25-key MIDI keyboard. In a forward-thinking move, it also includes surprisingly well-executed support for a real Squier Stratocaster guitar. The game even throws in the three-part vocal harmonies originally introduced in *The Beatles: Rock Band*.

**Why It Rocks:** Thanks to its more authentic leanings, *Rock Band 3* is as much a music teaching tool as it is an actual game. Sadly, critical praise far outstripped commercial performance, ultimately forcing owner Viacom to sell developer Harmonix and shutter its MTV Games division.

**Did You Know…** Although the idea of playing a keyboard like a guitar started in the early '70s thanks to Edgar Winter, the first keytar—a keyboard with a handle and guitar strap, akin to *Rock Band 3*’s peripheral—was the Moog Liberation in 1980.

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**MICHAEL JACKSON: THE EXPERIENCE**
*From: Ubisoft*
*Released: 2010 (Wii/Nintendo DS/PlayStation Portable), 2011 (PlayStation 3/Xbox 360)*

**Behind The Music:** Ever wanted to dance like Michael Jackson? Well, *Michael Jackson: The Experience* offered the chance to do so... or, at least, pretend that you could before failing miserably. How you did that, of course, depended on the format you played it on—Wii players used the Wii Remote, a la *Just Dance*, to match on-screen movement, while those using the PlayStation Move or Kinect could have their whole bodies tracked to prove just how unlike Jacko their movements were.

**Why It Rocks:** As posthumous releases go, Ubisoft’s hybrid karaoke and dancing simulator was as cynical as it was accomplished, racking up over three million sales worldwide simply because that’s what happens when someone famous that people love passes on. Still, you can’t knock those figures, even if they were earned from the death of a legend.

---

**ROCKSMITH**
*From: Ubisoft*
*Released: 2011*

**Behind The Music:** Looks like Ubisoft didn’t get the memo about games utilizing hefty peripherals being supposedly dead in the water: *Rocksmith* takes the opposite approach, as a music game that’s only playable using real guitars. And yes, we mean the real McCoy; not some pointless piece of plastic styled up to resemble an actual axe, but literally ANY real guitar with a standard quarter-inch jack on the end. Way to market yourself to a niche audience straight out the gate...

**Why It Rocks:** Supposedly, *Rocksmith* automatically adjusts to the player’s skill level, thereby acting as a guitar teacher by offering up challenges appropriate to your actual talent. It sounds great in theory, but whether it works in practice is another matter—at time of writing, the game isn’t due out for a few months yet.

**Did You Know...** Contrary to Ubisoft’s claims, *Rocksmith* isn't the first game capable of using real instruments to interact with the music—that honor went to *Power Gig* in 2010. As you can see by the fact that it’s in our Worst Music Games section though, it was rubbish.

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**Did You Know...** Early versions of the game shipped with a faux-diamond studded glove just like the one Jackson famously wore on stage at Motown's 25th anniversary event in 1983. Tasteful.
### The History of Music Games

#### Music Games Timeline

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**Behind The Music:**

**The Making of Guitar Hero**

Thanks to an abundance of groove-inducing titles like *Mad Maestro* and the *Dance Dance Revolution* games, the PlayStation 2 was the hottest place to watch sound and vision collide for a very long time.

But it wasn’t until publisher RedOctane shipped *Guitar Hero* in 2005 that aspiring rock stars with an axe to grind really got… well, an axe to grind. “It was the first game to actually make players feel like a famous musician,” says Greg LoPiccolo, VP of Product Development for series creator Harmonix. “You can party hard, even if you don’t know how to carry a simple tune.”

Thank the impressive plastic guitar controller the package shipped with, through which participants could jam along simultaneously with on-screen indicators. Sporting a whammy bar, strum bar, five fret buttons and a built-in tilt sensor, the home console device—the first of its kind in America—wasn’t just a marvel of engineering. It was also the realization of a dream initially envisioned over a decade ago…
Founded in 1995 by Alex Rigopulos and Eran Egozy, two students who met while working at MIT's Media Lab, Harmonix wasn't created to be just a typical production house—it was a company with a mission. "The goal was to leverage technology to provide non-musicians with the opportunity to experience what it was like making music," explains LoPiccolo, "and to essentially remove the drudgery of learning insanely complex motor skills and let people jump right into expressing themselves."

Unfortunately, early experiments inventing tech toys like The Axe—PC software that turned joysticks and mice into musical instruments—and creating attractions for Disney's Epcot Center proved strangely unf fulfilling. It wasn't until 1999, when LoPiccolo migrated from game developer Looking Glass Studios, that things really clicked and the seeds for Guitar Hero's genesis were first sown.

"There was this huge infusion of talent from the gaming biz into the company," LoPiccolo says. "Furthermore, Japanese titles like PaRappa The Rapper were just starting to catch on domestically and within six months, we knew without a shadow of a doubt that this was where the future of the firm lay."

Harmonix's first effort for home consoles, futuristic rhythm-based action outing Frequency (2001), merely affirmed how sound a decision it was. Industry heavyweights knew a good thing when they saw it, says LoPiccolo—Sony snatched up rights to the critically-acclaimed smash within 15 minutes of the title's presentation. Its equally impressive successor, Amplitude, also proved to be yet another feather in the company's cap when it arrived to rave reviews two years later.

Wooed by the fledgling hitmaker's success, Konami soon called on the outfit to create its highly-regarded Karaoke Revolution series, while Sony also showed continued support by partnering with Harmonix on 2004 release EyeToy: AntiGrav. So it was no surprise when RedOctane—then known primarily for dance mat controllers—contacted the firm in January 2005 with an indecent proposal. The plan? Create a game that'd transform everyday people into rock-n-roll legends.

"We believed in the concept and specifically wanted to work with Harmonix to bring a guitar controller-based game for the US market," explains Dean Ku, then VP of Marketing for RedOctane. "After a few discussions, it was clear we shared the same vision for the title."

"We were pretty much a crapshoot," LoPiccolo confesses. Days into the project though, things just clicked.

"My brother has a bachelor pad with an enormous projection TV and giant stereo," he says. "The first week, we took a giant stack of rock DVDs and went to his place to watch vintage concert footage. Everyone started fighting to get their favorite tunes in the game—I knew we were off to a great start."

And start they did, time and again, with over half a dozen software prototypes being made in total. After putting each through a rigorous series of tests (imagine the Air Guitar Olympics), the team would refine its design and begin development anew. Making matters worse, though, was the lack of access to their own guitar controller.

"RedOctane periodically sent us test units from the factory in China," LoPiccolo chuckles, "and to their credit, our associates there added all the features we requested, even if we didn't know exactly what they'd be used for when those requests were made. But we pretty much had to just do our thing and trust they'd come through in the end..."

As a temporary substitute, similarly-styled gamepads from a Japanese guitar-playing simulation were imported. Trouble was, the cheaply-made gizmos kept breaking. As such, over 100 in total were ordered with the vast majority ending up in an impromptu parking lot bonfire. Still, these units successfully served as a replacement until finished product arrived, and happily, these were everything the team dreamed of and more.

Though only a small publisher at the time, RedOctane's five years of experience making game accessories had taught it one thing: sometimes, you've got put your money where your mouth is. "We felt that the hardware was a critical component of play," chuckles Ku, "and committed to its excellence from the start."

This in itself speaks volumes towards explaining the presence of Gibson Guitars in the original game, not to mention the legendary music manufacturer's obvious influence on the design of its unique controller. Unfortunately there was just one problem at the time: had the project failed, so too would Red Octane. "We literally bet the farm on Guitar Hero," says Ku, "and then doubled down on [the peripheral]."
All that remained was finalizing the soundtrack—"We were shooting for working class, meathead rock and roll," LoPiccolo says. But once again, fate smiled upon the dynamic duo, with one record label after another consenting to include songs on the disc. The final tally, which included over 30 punk, hard rock and heavy metal hits featuring everyone from Black Sabbath to Sum 41, was even better than anticipated.

The results spoke for themselves; despite being previously unheard of and a massive risk for both publisher and developer, the game ended up flying off store shelves faster than retailers could stock it. More than just pure sales figures though, Guitar Hero—regardless of it being based on design principles previously introduced in Frequency and Amplitude—didn’t just sweep the nation. It also paved the way for future generations of mind-blowing, sonically-gifted games.

"It proved our original concept was valid: people love to make music," explains LoPiccolo. "Celebrities were into the game, consumers showed tremendous passion for the product and our phone was finally ringing off the hook. We actually felt like real Billboard artists must do."

RedOctane’s Ku echoes the sentiment: "We were relieved that Guitar Hero was recognized by critics and fans alike. The fact it ended up being a huge sales success is also a positive, I suppose…"

Unsurprisingly, all the team can say by way of thanks is this: "To those about to rock—we salute you!"

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**Behind The Music:**
**The Making of Rock Band**

Considering the massive acclaim to which Rock Band—the first videogame to let four players simultaneously jam online/in-person together on guitar, bass, drum and microphone peripherals—launched, you’d think creator Alex Rigopulos would have been singing a happier tune.

Instead, the co-founder and CEO of developer Harmonix (known for a string of hits dating back to the original PlayStation including Frequency, Guitar Hero and Karaoke Revolution) simply seemed happy to have survived production at the time. Then again, it’s probably a good problem for a self-professed ‘awful musician’ who sold his company to MTV, called Rock Band a ‘platform’ rather than a game and has made a healthy living for over a decade bringing joy to fellow tone-deaf geeks to have.
Having reached a crossroads regarding where the music genre can go next, we thought it was time to get the real scoop on how it all began and find out everything behind Rock Band’s creation by speaking to the man himself. Just so you know though, it involves less time kicking it backstage sipping champagne and necking with underage groupies and more figuring out precisely how to cram three weeks’ worth of industrial design and licensing meetings into your standard 24-hour day…

Q: Where did the inspiration for Rock Band come from—a long weekend at Burning Man, or just burning desire to relive your garage days?

AR: To really answer that question, I have to go back a lot of years. Back in the mid-’90s, we weren’t making music games at all—we were making music/creativity software. What got us started on games was that we really wanted to invent new ways for people who aren’t musicians to tap into what it feels like to make music. The first big inspiration after that came from Japan from the earliest music games like PaRappa The Rapper. It was those games that really set us off in the direction of trying to fuse music making and gameplay, and we’ve never looked back. As for Rock Band’s direct inspiration, I would say the ideas were gestating for as long as we’ve been making music games. We saw it as the ultimate genre incarnation we’d been dreaming of for many, many years.

Q: Why so? After all, it’s not like you hadn’t done the karaoke or guitar simulation thing before…

AR: Well, all of the games that we’d made in the past have really focused for the most part on the solitary act of music making. That’s great, but there’s this whole other layer of experience that’s missing from that which is the multiplayer aspect… the intense, immersive togetherness that comes only when you have a group of people playing together and feeling that kind of synchronicity. That’s really what we were tapping into.

Q: So how many people were involved in its development and how long exactly did it take you to make, since you mentioned it’d been gestating for a few years?

AR: Shortly after we finished the original Guitar Hero, it was apparent that it was time to up the ante and we started working on the earliest stages of the game, such as prototyping the drum designs and interface and things like that. From that point, we slowly ramped up efforts to a point where Harmonix was 140+ people and the overwhelming majority of the company was working on Rock Band.

Q: How tough was it getting so many moving parts—drums, guitars, microphones, etc.—to work in concert (no pun intended)?

AR: It was a really exciting challenge—we wanted the peripherals to seem less like toys and more like real instruments. Needless to say, it was tough…the sheer scope of the game was, and still is, enormous. Beyond core peripherals, you’ve got a complete drumming gameplay experience, complete guitar/bass gameplay experience and singing, plus the new band dimension that brought it all together. Never mind all of the online dimensions or character creation system either—it’s just a gigantic platform. Simply building all of this in the timeframe that we wanted was a pretty enormous undertaking.

Q: Sounds like it. But that makes us wonder: how in the heck do you simulate something as complex as playing music, let alone doing so in tune with others, especially if the person playing has no real talent?

AR: You need to simplify and abstract the act down to a level where people with no real music experience or talent or training or whatever can actually step in and start having fun. To make it something that’s accessible to just about anybody, but at the same time feels realistic enough that it’s meaningful so that the person actually forms a deeper connection with the music. It’s that set of balances that’s the real challenge and black magic of music game design.

Q: Speaking of black magic, just how hard does the development team rock in real life? And have you been to any good unholy masses lately?

AR: Actually, a few dozen of us are in off-hours rock bands that perform regularly. Many in multiple bands too. I think there are about 50-60 bands that various people on the staff here perform in, so it’s really deeply woven into the DNA of the company.

Q: What does the process of picking the tracks featured in the game involve? Obviously, with so many avowed devil horn-throwers on-hand, something tells us there were a few spirited debates had…

AR: There’s this joke that sausage and legislation are the two things that you just don’t want to see how they’re made. It’s much the same with track selections for the game—it’s a really contentious process because there are many parties involved, everyone in the company has opinions and everyone has strongly-held opinions. There are also a million factors to consider: suitability of the music to gameplay, suitability of different instruments to gameplay, the popularity of the
music, how strongly people feel personally about the importance of these songs and their presence in the game, and more besides.

Add in licensing and there are a million filters each song has to go through to make the final cut. And because people feel so strongly about it, it's a process where the group comes to fisticuffs on a regular basis trying to whittle all the candidates down to the final list. Of course, it's that same exacting process that usually gets us to a place at the end of the day that we're pretty excited about...

Q: What sort of tracks did you chose to concentrate on for Rock Band and why?

AR: On the disc soundtrack, what we really tried to do was cover a wide span of rock. Everything back to the late '60s to current frontline artists, plus different styles of rock from classic to progressive to alternative to grunge to metal to southern to punk. Once you got to our downloadable content plans, it became an area where the possibilities just exploded. We went after some '50s and '60s stuff that was actually this incredible formative music that was really the bedrock of everything that followed in rock and roll, but is less well-known. We actually wanted to use the Rock Band platform as a way to introduce less-known music to the world.

Q: Until it ended in 2011 though, how did your connection to MTV work out (apart from the token limo and seven-figure expense account every music biz executive received)?

AR: It was huge, actually. To its great credit, MTV took a very hands-off approach to us after the acquisition and basically just said: “Guys, we're not going to get in your way, just go make the game you wanna make and tell us what we can do to help.” Those guys have decades-old relationships with the record companies, music publishers and specific recording artists, and they really stepped up and played an enormous role in bringing artists to the table that have been historically untouchable... something like 85-95% of the music in the game ended up being original masters! We never would have been able to achieve that without MTV’s assistance.

Q: Nice, but as you know, ‘every rose has its thorn’—what was it like for you in this case moving forward knowing that you had to leave the Guitar Hero franchise behind?

AR: Obviously, parting was bittersweet. We're very proud of having developed the title. But at the time and even today though, I feel like our eyes were so much on the future of Rock Band and the category that it’s not where our heads are at.

I would just say that we're working harder than ever... the stars finally aligned to hand us an opportunity to build this gigantic game that we'd been dreaming of for so many years, but the last year before release was just a non-stop sprint for us to throw a thousand moving parts together to make it all come to fruition.

Q: Since you were kind enough to bring up the point, were there any crazy stories involved in Rock Band’s development?

AR: I wish we had colorful tales of debauchery, sex, drugs, meltdowns and other escapades, but really it was just incredible trying to get this enormous game built. Although I will say this: we grew so quickly that we just got increasingly packed into our office space like sardines. Eventually it got so bad that we had to move into a larger office in the middle of [the beta development period], and you can imagine what that was like. It’s some indication of just how insane things had gotten...

Q: Okay then, final moment of truth: you make these great music games—but just how crappy behind the Stratocaster are you really?

AR: I’ve been playing drums in a never-ending series of bands since I was in 10th grade and every one has been positively awful, but just good enough to keep us all playing. I also play a little guitar. The only thing I’m worse at than guitar is singing. That said, after a couple of drinks, I’ll probably be trying to take the mic out of your hand. That’s the beauty of Rock Band: for me, a big part of what motivated us to make these games is the frustration that I’ve felt as a shitty musician trying to make music. It’s personally rewarding to give even myself a shortcut into that experience.
Behind The Music: The Making of Sex ‘N Drugs ‘N Rock ‘N Roll

Once upon a time, a long time ago—before the Atari ST, before the Sony PlayStation, before Sonic the Hedgehog, even before the Internet as we know it—game creators Chris Yates and Jon Hare were killing time in Chelmsford, Essex when they dreamed up a crazy computer game about a wannabe rockstar called Nigel Staniforth Smythe.

Fast-forward to today, and the idea behind Sex ‘N Drugs ‘N Rock ‘N Roll has mutated into a downloadable 52-minute knocked-together ‘concept’ album and a handful of dated-looking videos that can be easily found if you prod the Internet in the right places.

Why anyone should care about anything that, according to its creators, “looks so ancient and sounds so cheesy, badly acted and variable in production quality” is probably not immediately obvious to anyone. Still, via the few remnants that are left, it’s found its place in the pantheon of computer games folklore for one main reason: it never came out.

According to Hare, it’s also the project that caused him both the most grief and the most joy that he’s experienced in his entire career. To tell the story of the entire project though, we’ll hand things over to Hare personally and let him take us back to Thatcher’s Britain of 1985, where it all began...

"Chris and I had been to school together and played in a band together since we were 15. Now at the very grown-up age of 18 and both having dropped out of college during our A levels, we were hanging out a lot together. In between writing songs and devising board games on his Dad’s wallpaper table (we literally drew on it in coloured pencils) we were also writing the odd throwaway joke computer game—Escape From Sainsbury’s, for example—on a very old handheld device, the name of which I don’t remember. During this time, we came up with this idea for a game called Drugged-Out Hippy.

It was designed as a Leisure Suit Larry-style point-and-click adventure game about the singer Nigel Staniforth Smythe. Nigel had borrowed £2,000 from some Hell’s Angels to buy himself a beaten-up old van so that he could go touring with his trashy rock band. He was claiming benefits, though, so to supplement his income he had to play gigs and deal drugs.

Drugs were quite a problem for Nigel as he had seven separate drug habits, all of which needed to be supported simultaneously. These drugs were core to the gameplay—speed made the game speed up, heroin made the game slow down, acid made him see things that weren’t there, cocaine made him talk shit and so on… all great gameplay mechanics. The other little problem for Nigel was that the Hell’s Angels were quite keen on getting their money back. In fact, Nigel only had two weeks left before they lost their patience and came round to his house to kick the shit out of him, bringing on the inevitable “Game Over.”

Around about this time, Chris started to pick up some programming work from a local games company called LT Software and I soon joined him there as an artist. The Drugged-Out Hippy idea was rejected by us as another bout of self-indulgent non-commercial nonsense. Then, in 1996, we formed Sensible Software on a government enterprise scheme, having spent less than one year at LT Software writing Spectrum games.

Between 1986 and 1994, Sensible Software became one of the biggest game developers in Europe on the Commodore 64 and Commodore Amiga, as well as eventually being hugely successful on the Sega MegaDrive/Genesis and PC. Our games included seven number one hits in Europe and others such as Parallax, Wizball, Shoot-'Em-Up Construction Kit, MicroProse Soccer, Mega-Lo-Mania, Sensible Soccer, Cannon Fodder and Sensible World Of Soccer (SWOS).

In 1994, Sensible had just completed Cannon Fodder 2 and SWOS, and after six years of virtually non-stop success we were now looking for the next projects to turn our attention to. Chris and I remembered two old game ideas that we had discussed in the past—ideas that might now be fully realizable with the new
£40,000 CGI Graphics machines that were all the rage and the talk of the industry (although 3D Studio and Maya proved to be a lot more cost effective in the end). The two ideas that we discussed were Office Chair Massacre and, not surprisingly, Drugged-Out Hippy. The former was a light-hearted game about office politics and blasting people to bits in wheeled office chairs that eventually became known as Have a Nice Day, while the latter became Sex 'N Drugs 'N Rock 'N Roll. Chris started to plan the future of Have a Nice Day on the Sony PlayStation (a new format for Sensible), while I started to sketch out some early plans regarding the look and structure of Sex 'N Drugs 'N Rock 'N Roll (also known as SDR for short) which was to be written on the PC, also a new format to Sensible to handle internally.

I still remember those early days when SDR started to move towards real production. I was producing pencil sketches of Nigel's bedroom (based on the bedroom of a musician friend of mine who lived in Chatteris, Cambridgeshire) that would eventually define the hand-drawn style of all the backgrounds in the game so brilliantly created by John Laws (now at Frontier Developments). We changed a few details along the way. Nigel's name was changed to Nigel Stanleyforth Smite and we moved the scenario to Bognor Regis, placing more emphasis on Nigel's slow ascent through the local music ranks in very grungy surroundings. Nigel also started to get involved in pimping during this period. Now living in his van, he could haul girls in off the streets and sedate them with drugs as he pimped them out to anyone who fancied a good time in the back of his van.

Naturally, his band was called The Subverts.

SDR fitted perfectly into the left-field half of Sensible's established formula of putting out a mixture of straight games like Sensible Soccer, Cannon Fodder and MicroProse Soccer with left-field games like Wizball, Wizkid and Mega-Lo-Mania. This was a formula that had thus far proven to be very successful.

By 1995, Sensible was riding the crest of a wave—everything we touched turned to gold and in retrospect, it was at this point that we should have sold the company. Of course, we didn't want to sell our company; we wanted to do what the hell we wanted creatively and amazingly we got our way. Warner Interactive (who had recently bought Renegade, the publisher of Sensible Soccer) signed a three-game deal with Sensible for SDR, Have a Nice Day and a new version of Sensible Soccer. This was a multi-million-pound deal (which was almost unheard of in the UK at this time) and amazingly in its eagerness to sign up the new version of Sensible's perennial best-selling football game, Warner had agreed to pay a seven-figure sum for Sensible's ultimate joke game: the over-indulgent

fantasy with very British humour that was Sex 'N Drugs 'N Rock 'N Roll.

I really can't tell you how much of a dream this was to me: over £1,000,000 to make my creative fantasy come true! This was much more interesting to me than the new Sensible Soccer, and something I'd wanted to do for ten years. This was my chance to prove myself as a media visionary; it was going to be a piece of art the likes of which the industry had never seen before. A marriage of games, music, TV and live performance. The shape of things to come!

And even better than that, it was such a fantastic excuse to write music. I had written music with Richard Joseph for the previous five years for all of Sensible's Amiga games; Richard and I were natural creative partners, as well as very close friends. In my career I've nearly always worked best in partnerships, so I really appreciated the special working relationship that Richard and I had. We gave him a very good budget for the sound work on SDR as well as all of our other projects signed to Warner—between us by the end of the project, we'd written and produced over 30 pieces of music for the game.

Various changes happened to the game plot during 1995. At Warner's behest, we got rid of the pimping angle in the game and also his total reliance on his seven drug habits. His drug-taking had now become recreational rather than dependent. How trendy.

We decided that more people could relate to a rock star than a guy who wanted to be a rock star, so we changed the plot to make sure that he had a record deal signed up and was jetting off to LA within the first few scenes of the game. We also ditched the paying back the Hell's Angels part of the story and changed it so that they just beat him up because he accidentally got signed up to their record deal by mistake. The band's name was also changed from Out Of The Frying Pan, Into The Necropolis to Black Magic to simply Magic as the game progressed.

We also developed the plot a lot more. It took in 63 separate settings and traced the band's journey through many different musical phases such as Punk, Glam, Space Rock, Sitar-backed folk, Disco and Serious Stadium Rock. Also, the band travelled all over the world to the US, Amsterdam, Japan and Mexico, as well as the UK. In total, the game was to include 150 characters, all of whom were earmarked for 3D modeling. Unfortunately, it's this element that later became a serious reason for the problems that later ensued—not just for SDR, but for all
of the games signed under the new Warner deal.

Sensible was one of the last big developers to move onto 3D, mainly because we were so successful on 16-bit machines like the Amiga, MegaDrive and Atari ST. By the time we did eventually get around to using 3D art in our games, we were two years behind most other top development companies and had a lot of very basic lessons to learn regarding how to best create, manage and program these resources. If you want an illustration of how technically unrealistic some of the art creation was in Sensible during these early stages, the very first character model made for the game was created in such a fashion that one of her eyelashes contained 10,000 polygons…

As 1996 rolled round, the art and sound production for the game was in full swing. I punctuated my time in our office in Saffron Walden with regular visits to Pinewood Studios, where Richard was recording and producing all of the sound. I used to really look forward to those days, going there with a song I had just written. I’d play it to Richard, record it and leave it for him to work his magic on it so I could come back the following week to hear a fully polished production masterpiece, and he loved the project as much as I did. Richard had already lived the rock star dream when he had his own recording deal from a top record label when he was in his mid-twenties back in the 1970s, but—by his own admission—he had blown it at the time by being too pedantic and up his own arse.

SDR was the chance for him to show his musical prowess and to emulate the arrangements and production styles of many different kinds of music. Plus, as luck would have it, the Derek And Clive/Viz-style schoolboy humor in the game was right up Richard’s street (in case you don’t know, Viz is a comic written for adults, packed full of puerile humor and swear words). It was about this time that one of her eyelashes contained 10,000 polygons…

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Believe it or not, in 1996 the art that you see in the videos of the game available today was pretty state of the art. In those days, everything had to be rendered out in a painfully slow process and our video director, Wes Dunton, and video animator, John Lilley (JL), would often work through the night while all of the machines in the Sensible office turned into farms to render out their animations. The look that the videos were giving the game was very exciting to us at the time.

However, the programming side of the game was starting to reveal some serious problems. We had been careless in our selection of lead programmer and now his incompetence was starting to show. Not only was the adventure engine he had written totally flawed, but his ‘yes man’ tendencies whenever he discussed any game issues with me now meant that I was a designer working with no adequate reality checks. For instance, the game plot I had written, by this stage, meant that the game would have to come out on 16 separate disks. Clearly, it was time for some changes to take place.

By 1997 we had pushed forward with the art even more, the music was coming along really well and so were the sound effects and speech, which were recorded at Pinewood with professional actors under the supervision of Richard and myself. The scripting was a lot of hard work for me to write: by the end of the project, I had written 1,500 pages of technical script for this huge adventure story. But even then, it was clear all was not well. I remember one night sitting in the office room in my home writing the script for yet another scene for the game and thinking “It’s a white elephant… it’s just not going to happen.” Something felt wrong about it. I was sitting there making up this rubbish about getting a blowjob on an airplane and I couldn’t believe that it was really going to make it onto the shelves. Life is never that easy. Oh, how right I was…

We decided to make some serious changes. Firstly, the game was reduced to a more realistic 24 locations and we slimmed it down to four discs rather than 16. Crucially, we also got rid of our lead programmer and replaced him with a new guy from the Bitmap Brothers. He was good, but we’d already lost a year on the programming and the game still wasn’t playable at all.

We also decided to string together a bunch of the animations and speech samples to make up a pilot cartoon episode of SDR. We took it to Hewland International (the TV company responsible for making the UK shows
The other major change to take place in 1997 was the publisher. Warner had decided to bow out of the games business and sold its publishing arm to GT Interactive. Unfortunately for us, GT Interactive was backed by the people behind Wal-mart, which is run by the strictest most down-the-line Bible belt Americans that you could ever wish to meet, and to be fair, we should have seen what happened next coming from the moment the ink dried on the Warner/GT agreement. Let’s just say that an 18+ game about snorting cocaine and shagging girls in cars wasn’t GT’s idea of family value. Still, the blood-drenched excesses of Duke Nukem were fine, apparently…

I remember having a number of discussions with Frank Herman at the time. Frank was a seasoned veteran who’d seen it all and was brought in by GT to head up its European office in London. He was used to controversy, having been responsible for distributing the video of <em>Texas Chainsaw Massacre</em> in the 1970s in one of his previous jobs, and he was advising me against some of the excesses of SDR.

“Does it really have to be cocaine?” he said. “Can’t we change it to space dust?” “No,” I said, “we want it to be real… that’s the whole point to set the game in the real world and to show how absurd real life can be.” Frank warned me that I was in danger of being “hoisted by my own petard;” I didn’t know what a petard was at the time, but that didn’t stop him from being right.

Chris and I started to get worried about what would happen if GT pulled the plug. We’d become very behind in the development scheduling of all three products under the deal we initially signed with Warner, largely because of our excessive royalties from <em>Sensible World of Soccer</em> and <em>Cannon Fodder</em>. Thanks to those, we continued to develop the game as we were contractually obliged to do so, although Chris and I were scared that if we suggested that we pulled some of the games from the deal, they would ask us for the money back (as they had the right to do). So we just soldiered on and, luckily, we rode out the six months and GT agreed to pay us all of the money they owed us from those previous six months on the condition that SDR and Have A Nice Day were withdrawn from the deal and no future money would be payable on those games.

What’s more, they wanted a cut of the money if we managed to sell either of them on to another publisher. I remember that meeting so well—when me and Chris left the meeting, all we felt was relief. Both SDR and Have A Nice Day had terrible technical problems, so to be let off the hook and to keep all of the money was the best possible result we could have expected.

Most developers in our situation would have been forced to have conceded something, but we were kept afloat by our excessive royalties from <em>Sensible World of Soccer</em> and <em>Cannon Fodder</em>. Thanks to those, we continued to develop the game as we were contractually obliged to do so, although Chris and I were scared that if we suggested that we pulled some of the games from the deal, they would ask us for the money back (as they had the right to do). So we just soldiered on and, luckily, we rode out the six months and GT agreed to pay us all of the money they owed us from those previous six months on the condition that SDR and Have A Nice Day were withdrawn from the deal and no future money would be payable on those games.

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What’s commonly thought of about SDR was that it was the salacious content that was its downfall. In truth though, we visited a top lawyer shortly after we got the game back from GT and he told us that the only thing illegal in the game was one solitary blasphemous reference that we promptly changed. The downfall with SDR, Have a Nice Day, and the subsequently-released <em>Sensible Soccer</em> 1998 was that when we signed up the three-game deal with Warner in 1995, we had no 3D programmers in our team at all and the first three we hired were all substandard. Sadly, this lack of foresight and bad judgment on our part is what eventually led to Sensible’s downfall.

By the end of 1997, SDR was in a new position. We’d decided to abandon Have a Nice Day—which had hit a very large technical brick wall—and to focus on...
reselling SDR to a new publisher. This was the first and only time that Chris and I found ourselves putting our hands into our own pockets to bail out the company, as we bankrolled SDR for a further four months while we attempted to find ourselves a new publisher.

But it wasn’t an easy sell by any stretch of the imagination, even if people did like what little of the game we could show them. No one could see how such an offensive game could find its way onto the shelves in the US—this was before Grand Theft Auto arrived, remember. Plus, the fact that GT wanted a cut of whatever money we received was putting off a lot of publishers.

Then there was the fact that despite the fact that 90 percent of the script, 80 percent of the sound and 75 percent of the art was complete, the programming was still only 50 per cent complete. The very worst thing was that we couldn’t really run the adventure engine at all when we were showing the game to people. The only thing we had to show that ran smoothly were the music videos—it was a nightmare, to be honest. We just needed an extra six months to get the engine working and then virtually the whole of the game would have been playable at once because most of the art, sound and scripting content was already finished.

But Chris and I weren’t prepared to bankroll the game indefinitely, so we had to sell it as it was. We saw 20 publishers (all of the big ones) and our old friends at Virgin offered us a UK-only publishing deal, but the money wasn’t enough to cover the remaining development costs. After four months, we very reluctantly threw in the towel and laid off about 60 percent of our staff. The company was now officially in wind-down mode.

The following year, 1998, was a quiet year for SDR. At Sensible, we focused mainly on the Soccer games left on our to-do list. We wound the company down to the bare minimum of employees and, eventually in October 1998 after two Sensible Soccer releases, GT told us that it didn’t want the final soccer game. This was a huge relief to us again, as we would have been making it at a loss just to honor the deal.

With the Warner/GT deal now history, Chris and I approached Codemasters about buying our company—essentially the company had been reduced to nothing more than a bunch of intellectual property rights by this stage, including the SDR IP. Codemasters agreed and in May 1999, the deal was complete.

About this time, after Chris and I had finally been paid back the money we had put in to keep the company going at the end of 1997, I calculated the overall finances of the Warner/GT deal of which SDR was a big part and, to my surprise, I calculated that we’d actually made a healthy profit out of the deal overall. Despite the huge amount of work and all the technical mishaps on SDR, the relaxed milestone structure and GT’s decent way of handling our ultimate exit meant that a potential nightmare had actually ended up being pretty good business. Although, of course, it was no consolation for the fact that the game never saw the light of day.

It was in early 1999 that I really started to feel the pain of SDR not being released. By this stage, it had been five years of my creative life and as an artist, pulling the plug on your greatest work in order to protect your family and your finances was a very bitter pill to have to swallow. At the end of the day, I could have remortgaged the house I bought with my Sensible Soccer royalties to risk everything on SDR, but I chose not to. I’m glad I made that decision, but I still hated to see the game just disappear; it was a bitter loss for me. It was also a huge loss for Richard Joseph who was mortified that the project had been canned—he’d done so much brilliant work on it and the soundtrack was so nearly finished now.

Between 1999 and 2004, Richard and I came up with the idea for the Sex ’N Drugs ’N Rock ’N Roll concept album. I’d managed to keep the music rights for all of the Sensible games from the sale of Sensible Software to Codemasters, and we realized that we could tell the SDR story this way. By overlaying existing music tracks into some order and linking them with dialogue and then overlaying that with sound effects, we could set the scene. The biggest problem was that quite a lot of the speech was yet to be recorded and we couldn’t afford actors, so we decided to do it ourselves. Most of the male voices you hear on the CD are three people: professional actor Gavin Robertson, Richard Joseph (who did an excellent BBC voice) and me. This turned out to be a fantastic project for us to work on, on and off over a few years and eventually, we had hashed together a tenuous plot by calling in a handful of female friends to do the female voices when we needed them and improvising everything else ourselves. This was really winging it now, with us making it all up on the fly most of the time.

In the end, the plot kind of wrote itself. The CD diverges from the game plot as soon as Nigel’s baby is born; from that point onwards, it was all about thinking on the spot when recording and then leaving it to Richard’s production and...
arrangement genius to do the rest. The timing of the sound effects and speech is totally immaculate throughout. Richard sculpted the sound arrangement of the soundtrack for many years to perfect it as best he could with the material he had to play with. The album that we ended up with is the embodiment of my working relationship with Richard—the humor, the music, the anarchic homegrown production style. It’s definitely not to everyone’s taste, and I reckon to loads of people who get to hear it not liking the soundtrack at all, or thinking it’s amateurish or simply just not getting it at all. But be that as it may, we loved it in all its cobbled-together glory, and every now and then, either of us would listen to it and phone up the other and say, you know, it really is pretty good.

Commerciaally though, we really didn’t know what to do with the soundtrack. We thought it was worth something to somebody and so we decided to sit on it and wait for the right time. In 2005, Richard and I decided to manufacture a bunch of Sex ‘N Drugs ‘N Rock ‘N Roll CDs with the 52-minute soundtrack on them. We even sold a few at a games fair in Kenilworth, Warwickshire and had the music videos (there are seven videos in all) running on a big TV in the corner. However, in March 2007, my dear friend Richard Joseph died unexpectedly of a cancer-related illness at just 52 years old. So that brings us up to date, with a bunch of the SDR music videos and the 52-minute soundtrack. This is all that is left of Sex ‘N Drugs ‘N Rock ‘N Roll except for a few more promotional videos and the pilot cartoon that was rejected by Hewland.

These days, the videos act as little more than museum pieces. Some of these videos were started in 1995, and all of them would have been cut into the game as reward sequences for finishing the previous stage of the adventure game. Each video features a song that was to have been played by Nigel’s band Magic in the game. Personally, I love the style of hand-drawn cardboard cutouts that you see featured in all of the videos and the anarchic, anything-goes energy that they radiate.

Ultimately though, SDR was always an art project made by artists. It is also a project that had its time and a place in 1997/98... but that time has long gone. Nowadays, our cultural sensibilities are different and our technical expectations are much higher. Quite often people talk to me about the chance of reviving the game and putting it out on some new machine, but in my mind the chance for the game has gone. I’ve put a considerable amount of work and thought into this project over the 20 years that it mutated from a Spectrum game about a drug addict on benefits into a 52-minute concept album storybook, and that’s where I’m happy to leave it.

Of course, the decision to give away the soundtrack was made in honor of Richard’s death, so that people can appreciate some of the great work that he was doing behind closed doors. To this end, I’d invite you to download the Sex ‘N Drugs ‘N Rock ‘N Roll soundtrack (you can find it at http://files.eurogamer.net/sexndrugsrocknroll_soundtrack_part1(1).zip) and to make a donation to Cancer Research UK through my JustGiving page (http://www.justgiving.com/jonhare) as a mark of respect to my dear and very much missed friend Richard Joseph.*

*Story reprinted with permission from our friends at Eurogamer (www.eurogamer.net)
About Scott Steinberg

Over one billion people have turned to noted video game and technology industry consultant, expert witness and analyst Scott Steinberg for insight into all things high-tech.

The CEO of TechSavvy Global— a world-renowned provider of strategic consulting, custom publishing and marketing/PR solutions for the consumer electronics, online/print/social media and video game industries—he also appears as a regular on-air video game analyst and tech authority for broadcast networks such as ABC, CBS, FOX, NBC and CNN.

Hailed as a top video game insider and technology expert by dozens of outlets from BusinessWeek to USA Today, Forbes and NPR, Steinberg has further served as the go-to business, tech and online/social media expert of choice for 400+ outlets from The New York Times to Playboy and Rolling Stone. From Delta to Clear Channel and MTV, he’s worked with many of the world’s largest companies and brands to develop, produce and launch cutting-edge products and services.

Apart from televised appearances, public speaking ops, syndicated columns and Internet shorts, Steinberg is also the creator and host of Game Theory, the electronic entertainment industry’s most critically-acclaimed insider video series. The former publisher of one of today’s leading high-tech product and gadget review sites, he joined with the 2007 acquisition of his tech industry advisory firm Embassy Multimedia Consultants.

A celebrated gadget expert, keynote speaker and high-tech entrepreneur who’s published software, websites, documentaries, magazines and more, his books include Video Game Marketing and PR, The Video Game Style Guide and Reference Manual and Get Rich Playing Games. Between public speaking ops, instructional videos, articles and podcasts, he remains one of the industry’s most outspoken DIY evangelists and advocates for continuing education.

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