

## **Putting the Band Back Together**

by

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We took the stage at high noon, wading through throngs of sweat-drenched Portland marathon runners buckled over with exhaustion. My teenage brother followed close behind for safety – there’s nothing scarier than an angry athlete.

Within minutes of turning on and tuning in, we were rocking alongside each other to songs written before either of us was born. The crowd cheered, we bowed, and turned off the game. None of us could actually play guitar or drums, but we definitely knew how to rock the house in a videogame.

### **Of profits and plastic instruments**

Founded inauspiciously in the mid-nineties by a couple of MIT students, Harmonix Music Systems has created software “toys”, interactive installations, and – of course – video games that immerse players with the thrill of making music. Now a subsidiary of MTV Networks, Harmonix has a pretty sweet living arrangement worked out: The Harmonix folks can go off and create the games they want to, and MTV will harness its juggernaut of influence over the music industry to deliver them the song rights and the audience. It’s the videogame equivalent of a killer record contract.

With “Rock Band,” Harmonix has created the game they’ve always dreamed of. Four players can each pick up an instrument – a guitar, a drum kit, or a microphone – and recreate rock’s greatest riffs from the Rolling Stones to Radiohead. Each instrument has five inputs (color-coded buttons on the guitar neck and drum pads) that correspond to notes on an instrument. By following the colored notes indicated on the screen, players gradually work their way up to patterns resembling the actual rhythm and notes of a song. The singer’s accuracy is essential as well, since “Rock Band” measures pitch, rhythm, and phonemes – meaning the game can tell if you’re singing the wrong words. It may be just a game, but it expects some proper musicianship out of its audience.

That’s not to say the game is inaccessibly difficult for non-gamers and non-musicians. “Once you get past the daunting price tag, the game has pretty much unlimited appeal,” says Brian Silva, a student at Northeastern University. Silva is one of the few elite “Rock Band” play testers invited to Harmonix to play the game extensively and contribute input on how to refine the experience. Young cousins and older relatives are all excited to play, says Silva. Even if the guitar appears too daunting, “anyone can sing or beat on the drums.”

### **You call them “Acca Dacca?”**

“The biggest ‘wow’ moment for me personally was watching my 80-something English grandmother play [Ozzy Osbourne’s] ‘Bark at the Moon,’” recalls “Rock Band” Senior Designer Dan Teasdale. “I don’t think anything can top that.”

After leaving his home of Brisbane, Australia to join Harmonix several years ago, Teasdale witnessed the massive success of the “Guitar Hero” games firsthand. Schoolchildren and octogenarians alike have been spotted shredding to their hearts’ content, side by side. So much for the archetypal 20-something arrogant male gamer.

“Rock Band” features an impressive set list of 45 songs chosen from a pool of thousands. Even as a lead designer, Teasdale admits wasn’t able to get his first choice – AC/DC – into the game. “It’s part of my Australian citizenship requirement to refer to them as Acca Dacca and own all their albums,” he says. However, nothing is permanent – thanks to the game’s promise of new downloadable songs and albums every week, Harmonix has been hinting at some big surprises in the months to come.

Even with a wide variety of music to play, the experience itself is unparalleled. Teasdale explains the purpose of the game succinctly: “I want people to live out that fantasy of being on stage with instruments and rocking out. It’s such an amazing feeling, and I’m pretty sure we’ve managed to distill it down into an easy-to-pick-up game.”

### **Coming soon: “Sousaphone Hero”**

But videogames are a waste of time, right? Shouldn’t parents be shuffling their kids off to sousaphone lessons as soon as they’re big enough to haul one around?

Not necessarily. While learning an instrument may be one of the most rewarding accomplishments in life, it's often an arduous process that drives children to boredom and anger. In fact, having fun is just as essential to development as education, says Leigh Anne Jasheway-Bryant, a comedic writer and speaker who holds a masters degree in public health.

Laughter and fun are critical for physiological health, says Jasheway-Bryant. But in school, "we have that natural sense of fun beaten out of us." Having fun enables people to "reconnect with what it means to be a juvenile in the best sense of the word."

Jasheway-Bryant makes a good point: "People sing in the shower – they don't do math in the shower!"

There's no doubting that "Rock Band" is a fun game: Dan Teasdale says he's still playing it for fun, which is "a very good sign after having to work on it for 18 months straight." But one of the game's strongest virtues is its dependence on cooperation between band members.

"You're not trying to recreate The Eagles," says Jasheway-Bryant; although they are her favorite band, they hated each other. "If you're playing a game that is teaching you how to get along with people, that's got to carry over to the rest of your life."

That's not to say a game like "Rock Band" can't inspire a new generation of musicians. Anecdotes of people young and old wanting to pick up a real guitar after mastering "Guitar Hero" are surprisingly common. And with the added realism of actual vocal training and drumming with authentic wood sticks, the gap between fantasy and simulation may be closing. "'Rock Band' could potentially start a 'drummer boom' from people learning hand/foot coordination and how to play rock beats," says Dan Teasdale.

**It's more than a feeling . . .**

Leigh Anne Jasheway-Bryant explains Maslow's hierarchy to me. It's a sort of triangle of needs, with the most essential – food, shelter, water – at the base, and the less important dwindling up to the top. But consistently across cultures, music has appeared as an essential part of life: “Every culture ever known to man has had music. We all have those things [art, music and play] as key elements, and so there's definitely something very important about them.”

Teasdale shares the same sentiment about the unifying power of music. “I've been hearing these awesome stories about how our games have introduced people to music, saved marriages, and changed people's lives.”

The holidays are fast approaching, and I'll be returning home to see the family and forget about the pressures of journalism for a brief period. But then again, there's so much pressure on me to manage my family “Rock Band” band and play lead guitar.

Maybe it would be easier to just pick up the old Strat instead.

Sidebar – “The Harmonix Discography”

Although Harmonix initially burst into homes with Guitar Hero in late 2005, the company has been around for over a decade. Each of the following games inspired a gameplay method that carries over into the company’s magnum opus, Rock Band.

Some of Harmonix’s previous projects include:

**FreQuency** – 2001 – Playstation 2

FreQuency combined the frenetic pace of classic arcade games with the intense rhythms of the electronic music scene in this little-known but beloved game. It represented Harmonix’s first mass-market videogame attempt, and while critics and fans adored it, most gamers passed it over. FreQuency first introduced the concept of playing notes as represented by shapes on an approaching track – a visual concept that was refined and carried over into Rock Band.

**Karaoke Revolution** – 2003 – Playstation 2/Xbox

Harmonix and Konami, famed creators of the Dance Dance Revolution series, joined forces to create a series of karaoke games. Players plugged in a microphone (almost identical to the Rock Band mic) and sang popular songs while the game judged accuracy and pitch. The series became a huge success, spawning spinoffs such as a country mix and an American Idol-themed version, complete with a virtual, glowering Simon Cowell.

**Guitar Hero** – 2005 – Playstation 2

The phenomenal game that reignited the rhythm gaming market in North America and gave virtual rockers something to talk about everywhere – from kindergarten classrooms to AARP meetings – needs no introduction. Having sold millions of copies, Guitar Hero’s immense success paved the way for Rock Band’s creation.