

OPINION

Music games need to refocus, not reboot

by Joe Rybicki January 29, 2010 13:39 PM PST

In his first editorial for us, columnist Joe Rybicki explores the changing dynamics of the music game genre, and examines what needs to change in order to keep things viable in the years ahead.

Music games are in trouble. No, wait.
Music games are doing great! No, wait.
Music games are doing great in terms of sales, but are disastrously down in terms of revenue. No, wait—strike that, reverse it.
No, wait...



Depending on whom you ask, you get a very different story about the health of the music game genre. Analysts, PR reps, and CEOs regularly throw around sales and revenue numbers that clearly can't *all* be right. It's enough to make you want to smash a plastic guitar, Pete Townshend-style. (Hey, at least replacing it would help out the genre. If it's in trouble. Which it isn't. Or is it?)

We know one thing for certain, at least: Music games are generating less money than they were even a year ago. Part of this is the economy, no doubt. But a bigger part is the fact that games have reached a critical mass. We are most definitely at saturation point. Fans of music games already have instruments that work with most newer games—so we're investing \$60 in a new game rather than \$200.

So where does that leave the genre? Bringing in less money, is where. But what's the alternative? Pundits and analysts have begun championing the idea that music games are due for a major reboot, with the idea being that new ideas will require new peripherals, which will bring new money into the genre. But there's a problem with this approach. And its name is DJ Hero.

DJ Hero's October launch brought about exactly the sort of changes critics of the genre have been clamoring for: a markedly different play style, an all-new controller, and a radically different approach to music content in the form of novel mashups and remixes of familiar tunes.

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And the response has been deafeningly apathetic. According to the NPD Group, which tracks games sales every month and publishes an eagerly-anticipated report on the subject each month, in the crucial first few days of release it sold less than 123,000 units, well below even the most conservative analyst estimate. Now, strong reviews and positive word-of-mouth could give the game a boost in the holiday season. But the point is, Activision tried to bring something brand-new to the genre, and the public seems to have barely noticed.

So is it even possible for music games to regain some of their faded glory, to reclaim that fire that drove Guitar Hero III to become the second-best-selling game of the decade? Sure it is. But it will take focus, restraint, and a willingness to work with the hardware consumers already have in their living rooms.

First, and perhaps most importantly: Designers need to ensure that their games support every bit of current music-game hardware. At this stage of the game, it's absurd that, say, Guitar Hero 5 doesn't support Rock Band instruments on the Wii. At this point, if you put out a game that doesn't support the instruments gamers already have, we just won't buy it. The idea that we'll invest in yet another set of drums or one more guitar is absurdly wishful thinking.

Second: Publishers need to show more restraint in the way they're releasing new product. The Guitar Hero franchise saw seven new games hit consoles in 2009, and the Rock Band franchise added another three. As good as any of these games might be, they're just too similar to the originals for many gamers to pay full price for them. Consider what a different state the genre might be in if these releases were presented—and priced—as the expansion packs they essentially are. Publishers, if you're not introducing significant new gameplay features, you shouldn't pretend to be releasing a brand-new game. It makes gamers stabby.

And finally: Developers need to introduce new features without requiring new peripherals. Yes, this is easier said than done, and in a genre so driven by specialized peripherals the instinct is to introduce new features via even more specialized gear. But there is still room for evolution with the current crop of peripherals. The introduction of the open note in bass lines in Guitar Hero World Tour is an excellent example of how to wring new functionality out of old hardware. Keep adding value to the instruments we already have and we'll keep coming back for more.

These things can happen. And they must happen if the music-game genre is to reclaim its former glory. But even if things continue to look grim, music games aren't going anywhere. Not as long as we still have rock n' roll fantasies to act out.

This editorial first appeared in the February 2010 issue of GamePro.

Joe Rybicki is a freelance writer who's spent the last 13 years covering the video game industry. He currently runs [Plastic Axe](#), a blog about music games. Follow him on Twitter [here](#).



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Week of January 31, 2010

all

ps3

xbox360

wii

pc

psp

ds

» Star Trek Online

Release Date: February 02, 2010

Platforms: pc

» White Knight Chronicles

Release Date: February 02, 2010

Platforms: ps3

» Global Agenda

Release Date: February 01, 2010

Platforms: pc

» The Sims 3 High-End Loft Stuff

Release Date: February 02, 2010

Platforms: pc

» Puzzle Chronicles

Release Date: February 02, 2010

Platforms: ds

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