

The New 'Guitar Hero' Feels Great, and That's What Worries Me

By Phil Hornshaw

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Lifting the strap of the undersized plastic toy guitar controller for *Guitar Hero Live* over my head, I already knew I was in trouble.

This year's San Diego Comic-Con was, in many ways, a perfect storm of assaults that could undermine my defense against the game. Each demo station for *Guitar Hero Live* was a cute little mini-stage, immersive enough to allow for concentration against the noisy backdrop of Microsoft's Xbox Lounge. There was a small crowd of people waiting in line to try the game, watching eagerly as three players at a time stepped up to their stations and took hold of their instruments, paying just enough attention to add some pressure to impress.

And there was the guitar controller itself—familiar and yet not, altered just enough that my mind couldn't quite call on the muscle memory I'd acquired over the college years I'd spent as an avid *Guitar Hero* player.

As I fought through the song, failing quite often but playing just well enough to make it through with a little dignity, I could feel myself getting sucked back into *Guitar Hero*. This, I thought, was not good.

PRETEND PRODIGY

Guitar Hero Live is fun in exactly the same way *Guitar Hero* was fun back in the mid aughts, when publisher Activision's music game was the reigning champion of rhythm titles (arguably—many preferred Harmonix's *Rock Band*, of course). That was before a ridiculous release schedule of new games in the franchise coming out multiple times per year killed sales with saturation and franchise fatigue and seemingly buried the music genre for good.

One key difference: the new version tries way harder to make you think you're an actual rock star, as you can see in the video above. Your mileage on this will no doubt vary.

Like its predecessors, *Guitar Hero Live* is played with a plastic controller that looks very roughly like a guitar. It has two kinds of buttons: a flipper where you strum, and buttons on the neck that are supposed to replicate the way you'd press strings to create notes. The old *Guitar Hero* controllers sported five large colored buttons down the neck, and holding them down individually or in combination while strumming was how you played, matching the colored "notes" on screen with the colored buttons on the controller. More challenging songs and difficulties demanded intense dexterity and hand-eye coordination, and even then it was nothing like playing actual guitar.

Guitar Hero Live adjusts the controller pretty significantly, making it ever-so-slightly more similar to actually playing a guitar. Instead of five buttons, there are six, but arranged into two rows of three—so notes appearing on the screen have you moving your fingers vertically as well as horizontally on the neck. It's a little more like holding the correct individual string on a guitar to produce a specific note, and therefore slightly more accurate to the sensation *Guitar Hero Live* is attempting to emulate.

I doubt anyone has ever played *Guitar Hero* because it is especially similar to actually being a rock star. It's impossible not to feel a little dumb playing the game, which is part of the fun, especially when enjoying it with other people. You're a make-believe rock star, playing to a nonexistent crowd full of fake people booing their simulated displeasure at your crappy imaginary guitar skills.

There's something about that lack of verisimilitude, the contradiction inherent in a cartoony Rock Star Simulator, the in-joke of playing the game itself, that helps make *Guitar Hero* appealing. It's ridiculous (especially now that an overenthusiastic ginger is constantly dancing around near you on the virtual stage), and you can have ridiculous fun playing it. But like anything fun, there's a dark side to *Guitar Hero* too.

ALL THE 'FREEBIRD' PERFORMANCES I'LL NEVER GET BACK



What *Guitar Hero* used to look like

I got really good at *Guitar Hero* in college, but it turns out no one at a party is impressed by fake plastic guitar shredding.

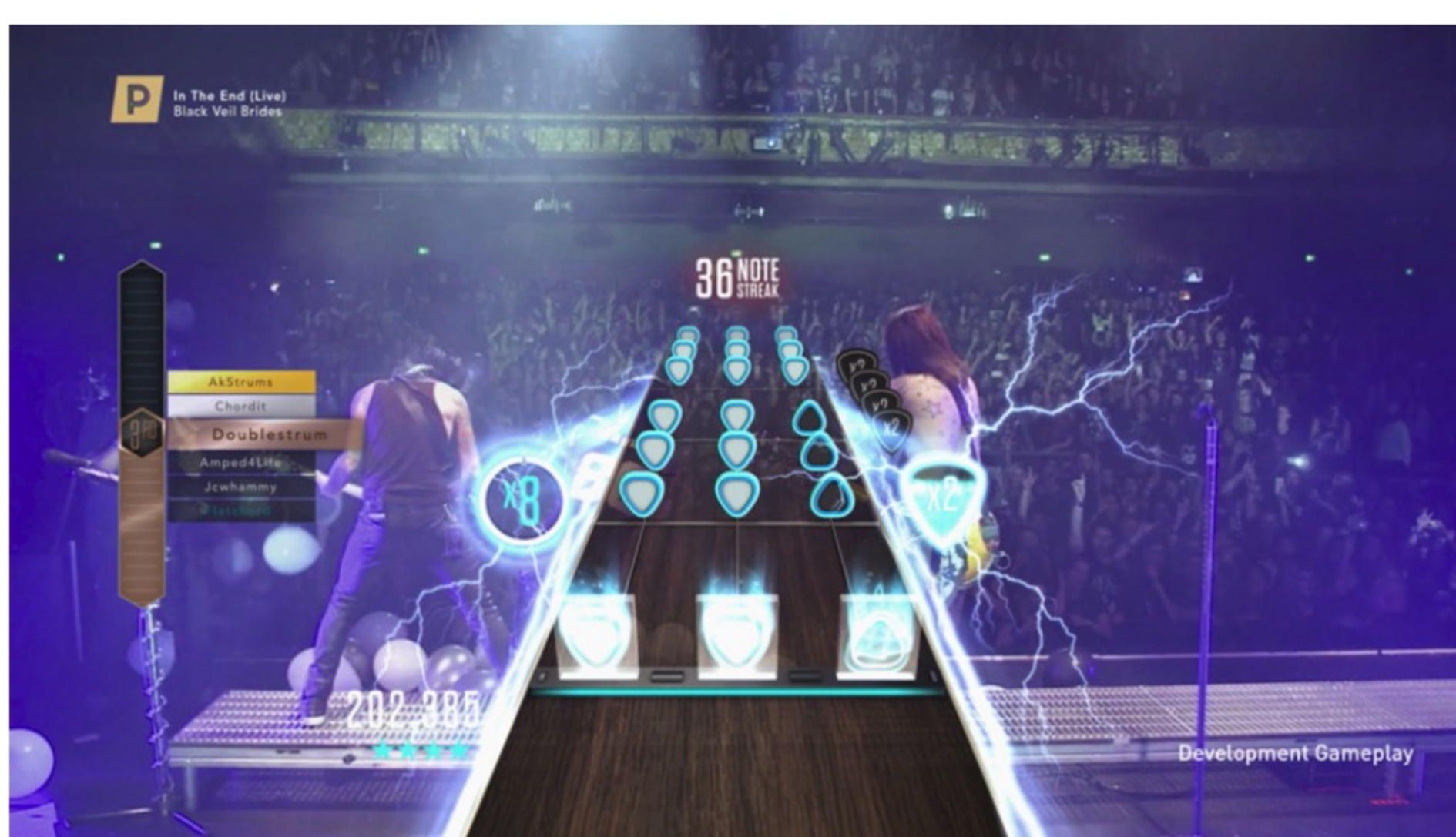
Guitar Hero and *Rock Band* dominated much of the time I probably should have spent studying. Friends would come over to snag a guitar and tear through a few Foo Fighters or Judas Priest tracks. My off-hours often drained away as I slogged through Expert difficulty songs to master a particularly tough rhythm or squeeze out a few more points. Like many gamers, I was very concerned with earning in-game "achievements."

Part of the trouble was my two friends, Josh and Eric, who helped inspire ridiculous obsession in me. We were constantly competing, notifying each other of our latest super-tough song triumphs and squaring off after classes. I liked *Guitar Hero*, but I liked keeping my skills sharp against the pair of them even more.

And then it all sort of just ended. *Guitar Hero* games stopped coming out. Jobs and graduations and relocations happened. Suddenly none of us really spent any time clicking away on the plastic guitars. And I have nothing to show for all those hours spent plowing through "Jordan," "Free Bird," "Through the Fire and Flames" and "Run to the Hills" alone in my living room. If I'd spent my college years picking away at a guitar instead of just pretending to, I'd be able to string together more than a couple of power cords today. Instead, all I've earned for honing my *Guitar Hero* skills is an abnormally flexible pinky finger.

Picking up the controller for *Guitar Hero Live* reminded me of what, at the time, was just good fun, but today feels like it was a waste of time. Of course, all video games are an exercise in amassing skills that have zero practical application. But at least when playing most games, you can engage with narrative or themes, like you might with film or literature. Those games that are just "fun" at least usually don't ask a huge skill commitment from players right out of the gate. Not *Guitar Hero*, though. It goes a step further, requiring more investment, both of time and money, than your average game. It asks a lot and returns even less.

REPRESENTING THE PLASTIC GRIM REAPER



Maybe I'm just getting too old for this shit, a phrase I fall back on more and more as an aging video game critic. But more likely I think *Guitar Hero* is a perfect shorthand for that transition between waste-your-time pursuit-of-fun childhood and that ever-creeping question of what you're getting in exchange for your time that adulthood encompasses so entirely.

This is why I'm a bit worried about *Guitar Hero Live* and Activision's new smart, funny and interesting iterations on its formula. I know I'll want to play it, I know I'll be pretty good at it—and I know I'll feel an oppressive desire to master it.

Would it be too dramatic to say this baby guitar's incessant clicking and *Guitar Hero Live*'s endlessly flowing river of notes symbolize mortality? Okay, yeah, maybe it would. But as fun as I can already tell *Guitar Hero Live* will be, ultimately it'll only leave me wondering where all that time went.

I'll probably have some pretty sick achievements when I finally get to Video Game Valhalla, though.

Phil Hornshaw is a freelance writer and the co-author of So You Created a Wormhole: The Time Traveler's Guide to Time Travel and The Space Hero's Guide to Glory. He was hoping the latter would help him get Han Solo hair, but so far he's been unsuccessful. He lives with his wife and annoying cats in Los Angeles.

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