

'Guitar Hero Live' is That Dream Where You're Unprepared for Class

By Phil Hornshaw
November 20, 2015



I'm standing in an industrial-looking room, watching a guy do unimpressive skateboarding tricks on a tiny indoor half-pipe, wondering why the hell I'm here. Then the call comes.

"Come on!" says one of the skater guys, and we turn and walk 10 steps and suddenly we're on a stage, roadies handing out guitars, and I'm wondering why anyone would set up a little halfpipe in the wings of a stage and also how it was so quiet and relaxed over there if we were supposed to go on in 14 seconds.

Now I'm standing on the stage with a band made up of skater guys, looking out into the large, cheering music festival crowd. The band is pumping each other up, grinning wildly in my face with encouragement, apparently so very stoked that we're here and I'm with them. I have no idea who these people are.

Then the song starts. I've never heard it before. I'm playing lead guitar.

Welcome to *Guitar Hero Live*, the music rhythm game that very closely resembles a recurring nightmare I've had since I was in middle school.

YOU'VE MISSED EVERY CLASS AND TODAY'S THE FINAL



Guitar Hero Live tells a semi-secret story in a way that no game in the franchise ever has before. Sure, they've all had you playing music onstage in front of a crowd full of people who boo if you fail. But in the latest iteration of the music game developer Freestyle Games replaced the franchise's cartoonish characters with real video of real people playing real sets in front of real crowds. Well, they're all probably actors, but still. It's eerie.

In "Live" mode, each set of songs plays as if you're the protagonist of a short film shot from a first-person perspective. You occasionally see your hands and your guitar. Other people look at and interact with you, and it all conveys an uncanny sense of actually being there, as much as a game like this can.

That *Guitar Hero Live* is populated with actual people is what makes it stressful. When you're good, the band is happy, the crowd is charged, and everyone's having a great time. When you're terrible, though, the air gets sucked out of the room—or more accurately, the arena, which might be filled with thousands of people. Crowds turn on you, booing and holding up mean signs, maybe even hopping up on the stage to get in your face. Band members become angry and disbelieving at your sudden, utter lack of coordination and talent. Play badly enough for long enough and they'll shake their heads in disbelief or throw things at you, although the nightmare won't end until the set does. The band will apologize to the crowd for your horrendous performance (and it is yours, because no one else is terrible at their job). Radio DJs describing the show between sets will hint that you'll soon be out of a job.

But you never are out of a job. You somehow float away, undamaged except for a bruised ego. The strange disconnect between your ability to play in front of huge crowds and your lack of actual ability to play at all creates a fascinating recurring nightmare of failure. You are the mysterious mercenary Guitarist, and you are ruining the lives of bands you've never before met as you attempt to play songs you've never heard in front of all their fans.

SOMEBODY'S COUSIN WHO RUINS DREAMS

Failing at *Guitar Hero Live* creates an amazing story. Each of what might be considered the game's "levels" is a multi-song gig during a music festival. You fill in with bands who play Katy Perry, Eminem and Skrillex, Good Charlotte. They all seem to know you and they're happy you're there. You never say anything but you're definitely a person—they speak to you, they smile at you, they need you to come fill in for their band. That's what it seems is happening in *Guitar Hero Live*: you're a musician who plays with everyone and is tied to no one, a guitarist in it for the paycheck (and maybe a little glory).

How frightening, then, the amount of trust these poor musicians place in a one-gig pinch hitter.

Failing at songs, which is more or less inevitable for most players, gets people mad at you. And that's upsetting, sure, because they seem to be real folks and no one likes failure. But it's not a stretch to consider the deeper implications. These are bands with, one assumes, record contracts and fans. There are people to whom these bands are accountable, and their reputations are important. And here you come, playing the wrong notes and rhythms as you stumble through your nightmare of unpreparedness. Who knows how many people just swore off the all-female group playing pop hits or the British techno band with one woman whose only job seems to be awesome at dancing. How many record sales did you cost them? What if you killed their contract?

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You disappear to your next job, while they're stuck picking up the pieces on Twitter (you see their tweets about the show between gigs!) in hopes that you haven't just crushed their careers in the already fickle music industry. *Guitar Hero Live* is just a game about playing fake guitar, but it also is a game that can create dread and sadness, one that makes you feel bad not just because your skills are weak, but because people depend on you and you let them down.

How do you keep getting these gigs? Even if you were mostly a great guitarist, your lack of preparation means you might as well show up to gigs drunk. Your devil-may-care I'll-just-wing-it attitude would have killed your reputation in musical circles long ago. So how do you keep getting jobs? You must know somebody. You must be the sister-in-law of some producer, or a well-liked roadie's nephew that nobody's heard of. You're connected, and you never hang around long enough to see what disasters you have wrought. You're somebody's shitty cousin, and you're ruining dreams one botched gig at a time.

THE GUITARIST'S EXALTATION



There's an arc to the story of the Renegade Guitarist. Play enough shows and play them with some degree of proficiency and you'll see your temporary bandmates firing up crowds before turning to flash you the thumbs-up as you help them play a successful show. And then someone will pull some attractive women up on stage to dance (and if you suck they'll scream in your face), or leap out to do a crowd surf. You, though—you're glued to your spot. Playing with moderate panic, hoping your "hero power," figurative as well as a literal thing you can activate to get the crowd back on your side, will keep the show alive.

Your shows get bigger and bigger, the bands better and better, but all you have is the nightmare. You never get the fantasy.

Until, that is, you reach your last show. It's the headline gig of the biggest festival. Your hands are shaking, and as you stand up and follow the band out toward the stage, people keep passing and asking if you're all right. You're not all right, you realize, as you step onto the stage and look out into a sea of faces, probably 30,000 strong. It's a damn stadium you're playing. You, Mr. Drunk-at-the-Show Can't-Remember-Which-Band-This-Is are about to bullshit your way through the biggest show imaginable.

It can go badly, of course. You can play as awfully here as anywhere, ruining the good time of thousands in moments. But it can also go extremely well. And for once, the Guitarist gets a taste of the glory she seeks. Piggybacking on the success of some huge band of which you'll never really be a part, you finally reach the level of excitement the bands have all had all along. You overcome your nerves, you light up with the thrill of the show, and you smash your guitar against the stage because you've always wanted to do that. The Guitarist kicks chunks of musically inclined wood aside and takes a running leap into the crowd, letting the energy of the people who love you carry you away, if only for a moment.

Guitar Hero Live is **Impostor Syndrome**: The Game. That sense that you're not really good enough, that you don't belong and everyone's on the verge of discovering that you conned your way in here, is at the heart of the game. This is a real thing that people experience, and *Guitar Hero Live* makes it the central conceit of its story, whether it intended to or not.

The game plays the full story of this particular bad dream—including your ability to overcome it. In the end, as your skills improve, the Guitarist comes to believe she deserves the adulation her short-term bandmates enjoy. Your cousin the roadie or sister-in-law the record producer was right about you. You really do deserve to be here. You really are a talented human with value.

And then, like everything in life, it ends. You go home and practice playing along with music videos on your TV (the other mode in the new *Guitar Hero*), waiting for the call for your next gig. Like life, you hope that by the time the call comes, you'll be good enough that you won't let anyone down.

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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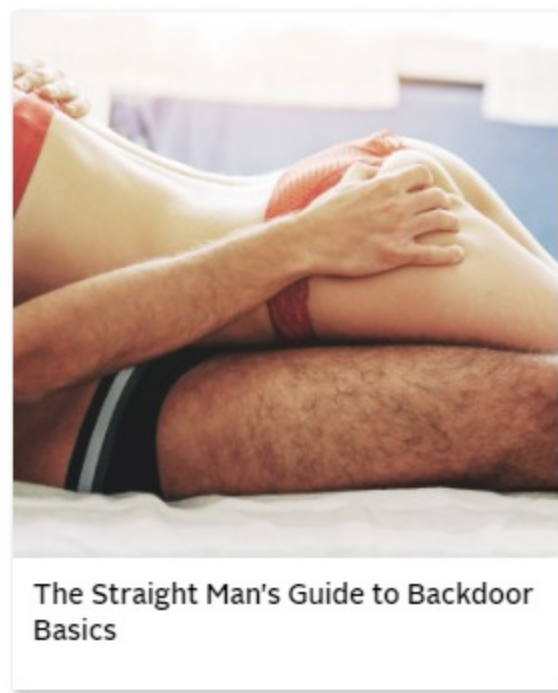
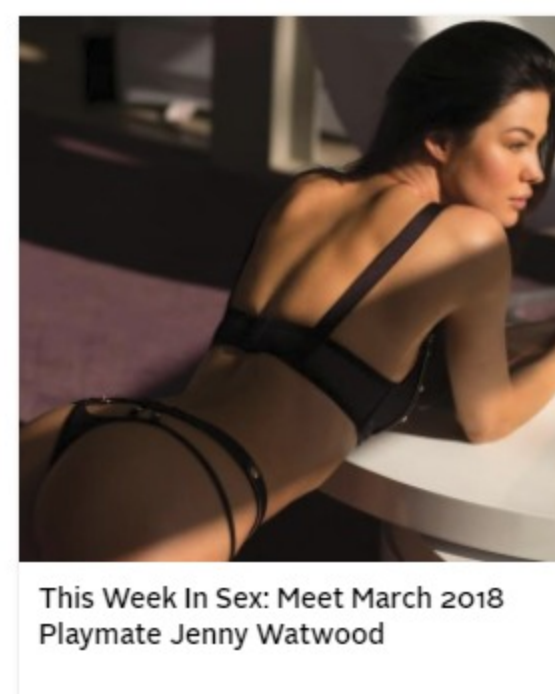
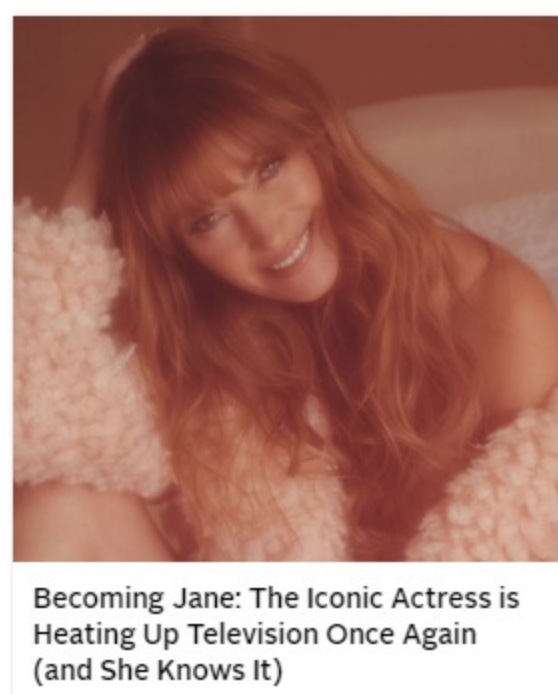
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