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MEDIA REVIEWS

Guitar Hero Live. FreeStyle Games, 2015.

During its heyday in the late 2000s, the *Guitar Hero* series of music-based games was an omnipresent feature of living rooms and college dorms across the United States. Using plastic controllers designed to imitate guitars (subsequent versions of the game added bass, drums, and a microphone for vocals), players were given the opportunity to "perform" a variety of classic and modern rock tracks from the 1960s on—an experience that proved entertaining, rewarding, and often educational for millions of players worldwide. For budgetary and licensing reasons, the first *Guitar Hero* featured almost exclusively cover versions of the original songs, but the game's sustained success encouraged many bands to allow use of their master recordings in later music-based games. And there were a number to choose from: *Guitar Hero*'s massive popularity triggered a flood of sequels and competitors (most notably the *Rock Band* series). Within a few years, the market was oversaturated, sales slowed to a trickle, and the demise of the "*Guitar Hero* fad" was widely proclaimed around 2011. *Guitar Hero Live* represents a concerted effort from developer FreeStyle Games and publisher Activision to recapture the series' initial critical and commercial successes by tweaking the gameplay formula and adding features targeted to consumers raised on streaming media. This review is not primarily concerned with whether *Guitar Hero Live* is an enjoyable experience (it is), but rather with how the game differs philosophically from its predecessors, what those differences might reveal, and how we might fruitfully use the game in pedagogical settings.

The core gameplay of *Guitar Hero Live* is for the most part unchanged from previous titles in the series. In the main game mode, players begin by choosing one of the forty-two built-in musical selections, a predominantly postmillennial hodgepodge that runs the stylistic gamut of contemporary pop/rock from Linkin Park ("Wastelands") to Katy Perry ("Waking Up in Vegas"), with a few nods to classic rock in the Who ("Won't Get Fooled Again"), the Rolling Stones ("Paint It Black"), and Queen ("Tie Your Mother Down"). Once a song begins, players press fret buttons on the neck of the plastic guitar and "strum" in rhythm to a series of on-screen prompts. Correct inputs on the guitar controller produce the correct notes of the song and drive the virtual crowd wild; incorrect or skipped inputs result in missed notes, demoralizing choruses of "boos," and potentially a "Game Over" screen. There are, however, some notable changes and innovations in this reinvention of the *Guitar Hero* franchise. *Guitar Hero Live* returns the series to its original guitar-only format (two players can play simultaneously with two guitars), eschewing the more band-oriented focus of the later *Guitar Hero* games. Furthermore, the guitar itself has been redesigned. In place of five fret buttons in a straight line, there are now two rows of three buttons. While ostensibly intended to increase realism and help players with smaller hands, this change also means players cannot use any older controllers they may already own.

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The most intriguing and potentially useful aspects of *Guitar Hero Live* are the dual meanings of the title's final word: "live." Liveness—a concept as problematic as it is pervasive—is in fact the game's core conceit. "It's about to get real," the tagline tells us, and the designers' efforts at creating a type of immersive reality are immediately obvious in the visuals that accompany gameplay. The cartoony, campy avatars of the previous games are replaced with high-definition, first-person video captured by a robotic camera. Players are placed into the space the lead guitarist would occupy during a concert, surrounded by stage crew, band members, and a large and (usually) enthusiastic crowd. Moreover, each video is tailored to a specific song. Through the eyes of the lead guitarist, players see their fellow band members (in reality session musicians hired for the game) performing the music in real time, in a sense embodying the cover versions common in the early *Guitar Hero* games. As the camera's first-person perspective changes position or pans around, players might see other band members offering high-fives after a particularly good solo or commiserating after a less successful effort, and the audience responds believably to the music.

The most impressive aspect of these videos is their cleverly adaptive nature. Although the videos seem to be one continuous shot, they are in fact dynamically responding to the player. The video seamlessly takes different paths depending on how well the player performs; the "rock star" experience within the game is narrowly tailored to the player's actions, strengthening the illusion(?) of liveness. The end result is both immersive and a bit uncanny, complicating *Guitar Hero*'s already fraught tension between gameplay and musical performance.[1] As a result, *Guitar Hero Live* could be an immensely useful tool for exploring these issues in a classroom setting. It is easy to imagine, for example, fruitful class discussions surrounding the relative value of "live" versus "recorded" music, or encouraging a more nuanced understanding of "performance" in postmillennial culture.

Guitar Hero Live's greatest interest pedagogically, however, likely emerges from the second meaning of the game's title. Previous iterations of *Guitar Hero* (and *Rock Band*) allowed players to purchase songs from a vast library of music and download the tracks to their game console's hard drive for future use, either on- or offline. *Guitar Hero Live*, by contrast, includes fewer tracks on disc than most of its predecessors, but prominently features its online-only play mode, dubbed "GHTV." Upon choosing this mode players select one of several genre-based "channels," each comprised of an endless set of streaming songs. Here the sense is somewhat more akin to karaoke performances than a rock concert simulation; in place of the cover version we hear in the offline game mode, here we hear the original version (licensed for use in streaming media) and we see the necessary gameplay information lightly superimposed over the official music videos, rather than "live" footage. There are several ways to use GHTV, each clearly adapted from the types of media delivery

[1] On issues of performance and liveness in *Guitar Hero*, see Kiri Miller, "Schizophonic Performance: *Guitar Hero*, *Rock Band*, and Virtual Virtuosity," *Journal of the Society for American Music* 3, no. 4 (November 2009): 395–429. Miller further expands many of these ideas in her *Playing Along: Digital Games, YouTube, and Virtual Performance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), chapters 3 and 4.

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services that have proven so successful with the game's core audience of teens and twenty-somethings. In its most basic form, GHTV operates similarly to the popular web-based music service Pandora; players do not choose specific songs, and the repertoire of possible choices is expanding on an almost daily basis to incorporate recent hits. Should players want to perform a particular song, however, they may do so by spending tokens, which are awarded through in-game accomplishments or, crucially, by paying an additional fee—a "freemium" model borrowed from the barrage of extremely lucrative free-to-play mobile video games. Finally, in a model akin to Spotify or Apple Music, players may purchase an unlimited-access "party pass," which allows unlimited plays for a specific length of time, as well as additional features such as the creation of playlists.

In other words, *Guitar Hero Live* jettisons the notion of music ownership; at most, players rent the songs for a set period of time. The game thus functions as a microcosm of both the music and game industries—and the increasing symbiosis thereof—in 2015. Even if business models change dramatically in the coming years, the game will remain an illustration of how recent shifts in media consumption patterns have fundamentally (and rapidly) altered how listeners understand their relationship to music. For that reason above all, *Guitar Hero Live* is both a worthwhile classroom tool and a cultural artifact deserving of further study.

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Follow Me Down: Portraits of Louisiana Prison Musicians. Benjamin J. Harbert, director. Films Media Group, 2012, DVD.

Benjamin Harbert's 2012 documentary *Follow Me Down: Portraits of Louisiana Prison Musicians* aptly begins where John and Alan Lomax's fieldwork and recordings left off: the Louisiana State Penitentiary (better known as Angola). Unlike the Lomaxes' work, however, Harbert's film brings a new and important dimension to this music. Whereas previous observers heard only audio recordings of the prison performances, seeing the faces of those performing drastically changes the calculus of the observation by adding an increased humanistic and personal element.

The film is organized into three expository sections based on the three Louisiana prisons Harbert visited: Angola, the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women, and the Elayn Hunt Correctional Institute south of Baton Rouge. The Louisiana setting is especially important and telling, given that the state incarcerates more of its population per capita than any other in the country.[1] This statistic is compounded when considering that over half of the state's prisons are unscrupulous for-profit

[1] Cindy Chang, "How Louisiana Became the World's Prison Capital," New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, 13 March 2012.

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