

ROCK MUSIC IN VIDEO GAMES

by William Gibbons

Consider these three moments from video games: (1) While taking my "borrowed" car for a spin in Grand Theft Auto V (2013), I spend some time searching for the right in-game radio station. Elton John's "Friday Night's Alright for Fighting" (1973) doesn't seem quite right, and I switch through Smokey Robinson's "Cruisin'" (1979) and Rhianna's "Only Girl (in the World)" (2010) before finally settling on Stevie Wonder's "Skeletons" (1987). (2) After scoring the winning touchdown in Madden NFL 11 (2010), I put my controller down to gloat about my victory. As the game sits on a menu screen, my friends and I hear a series of classic rock and metal songs, from KISS's "Rock and Roll All Nite" (1975) to Bush's "Machinehead" (1996) and Guns N' Roses' "Welcome to the Jungle" (1987). (3) As I satisfyingly complete the final tasks in the puzzle game Portal (2007), I settle in to watch the ending credits. To my surprise, I hear "Still Alive," written by the folk-rock musician Jonathan Coulton specifically for the game—a song that has since become one of Coulton's most popular tunes.

These three very different video games illustrate some of the many ways rock music has been incorporated into recent video games. In the early days of video games, technological limitations prevented the use of prerecorded music: games simply didn't have the necessary memory space to store it, and consoles or computers didn't have the hardware capabilities to play it back. But now, in the era of DVD and Blu-Ray discs, massive hard drives, and cloud computing, the amount and sound quality of game music is virtually unlimited. Even setting aside the many music-based games, such as the Rock Band, Guitar Hero, and Dance Dance Revolution craze of the 2000s and early 2010s (discussed by Mark Katz in his "Backstage Pass"), we must acknowledge that rock has become an integral part of the soundtracks to video games in a wide variety of genres.

There are many reasons game designers and audio specialists might choose to include either well-known or newly written rock music in their products. Most obvious are the aesthetic benefits, or how music can enhance players' experiences by creating a particular emotional effect. In the case of *Grand Theft Auto V*, for instance, the variety of songs—over 240 in all, ranging from classic country to electronica—allows players to choose music that matches their mood, resulting in a more enjoyable and personalized game. In Madden NFL 11, the music keeps the players and spectators from getting bored, helping maintain interest even when nothing exciting is happening in the game itself. Both games rely on preexisting songs, giving players the thrill of recognition—an "I love this song!" sensation—letting their already established enjoyment of the music transfer to their enjoyment of playing the game.



Although preexisting music is probably more common in games, games designers and composers might decide to use newly created rock or rock-influenced music. For one thing, new music can be directly tied to a specific game in a way preexisting music cannot. Jonathan Coulton's songs for the ending credits of *Portal* and its 2011 sequel, for example, provide musical epilogues, contributing to the stories and rewarding players for completing the games. Designers may also simply find that a rock sound best fits the mood of the game: composer Darren Korb chose an indie rock sound for Bastion (2011) and Transistor (2014), for instance, both of which include several complete songs. As games have become increasingly viewed as legitimate artistic products, well-known rock musicians have also contributed to game soundtracks. Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails, for example, created music for the game Quake (1996) as well as the theme music for Call of Duty: Black Ops II (2012).

Not all reasons for including popular music in games are aesthetic. Rock soundtracks also offer both the game and music industries the opportunity for effective cross-marketing of products: video games advertise the music they contain, and a soundtrack containing well-known artists may entice players to buy a particular game. The game company Electronic Arts (EA) is a case in point. For a time, many EA Sports games (such as *Madden NFL*, *FIFA Soccer*, and so on) included a feature that allowed players to purchase and download the music they heard in EA games. EA also owns the record label Artwerk Music Group, which signs new artists whose music can appear in games.

There have even been a number of games created to market the musicians themselves as much as their music. An early example is the Atari 2600 game *Journey Escape* (1982), which tied directly into the band Journey's 1981 album *Escape*, and featured brief snippets of "Don't Stop Believin'" (1981). Later efforts to immortalize musicians and their music in games have included the game *Michael Jackson's Moonwalker* (1990), which featured several of the

title musician's most famous songs; *Revolution X* (1994), an arcade shooting game featuring the band Aerosmith; and the action game *50 Cent: Bulletproof* (2005) along with its sequel *50 Cent: Blood in the Sand* (2009), both of which included a number of unique tracks designed to entice the rapper's fans into purchasing the game. While these efforts have not always been successful (much like films starring musicians), they are another illustration of the thinning boundaries between media.

As a final possibility, some games in recent years have allowed players to incorporate their own music into the gaming experience. The popular computer game *The Sims 3* (2009) and the PC version of *Grand Theft Auto IV* (2008), for example, allow users to create custom radio stations that play any music players choose from their hard drive, leading to an endlessly customizable soundtrack. Some home consoles—for example, the Sony Playstation 3 and Microsoft Xbox 360—offer similar customization options, letting players replace the soundtrack of some games with their own audio while preserving voice acting and sound effects.

The future of rock music in games is difficult to predict, but it offers many intriguing possibilities. Will rock musicians increasingly market their music through games? Will games incorporate streaming audio to allow for virtually unlimited amounts of preexisting popular music? Will some games completely do away with traditional soundtracks in favor of using only the player's own music? Or might we see many entire original game soundtracks provided by well-known bands? One thing seems clear: given the aesthetic and financial benefits of including rock music in video games, it seems all but inevitable that the trend will continue for many years to come.

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