

100 Greatest Video Game Franchises

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52 million units worldwide, with gross sales nearly equal to the FBI's crime cost estimates. This included a first-day release that made *GTA* the most successful entertainment launch in history (earning nearly \$8,600 per second for the first 24 hours of its release).¹¹ While the jury is still out on the relationship between playing *GTA* and committing crimes, it is clear that the epicenter of modern sandbox video gaming is located somewhere in the crime-ridden, blood-soaked, and often hilarious urban jungles of Liberty City.

Similar Franchises: *L.A. Noire* (2011), *Saints Row* (2006), *True Crime: Streets of LA* (2003)

—Nicholas David Bowman

GUITAR HERO

(est. 2005)

Platform: PlayStation II

Developer: Harmonix

There are few video game franchises that have seen such a meteoric rise and subsequent fall, in terms of players and revenue, as *Guitar Hero*. The origins of the rhythm-game series can be traced to the success of the Japanese arcade game *GuitarFreaks* (1998), which let players rock out in an arcade hall while strumming a plastic guitar. In hindsight, it took surprisingly long before a game publisher tried to bring the arcade experience into the home and make it available for a global audience. But when it did, it became clear that the concept of a peripheral-based music game resonated with millions of players. What happened after the somewhat unexpected success of the first iteration in the *Guitar Hero* franchise speaks volumes about the economics of the core segment of the game industry. The rise and fall of the series demonstrates both the revenue potential and limitations associated with publishing blockbuster, or AAA, games. That is to say, the *Guitar Hero* franchise is indicative of a particular publishing arrangement that is best understood as hit-driven, highly planned, and capital intensive.

The first game in the *Guitar Hero* series was developed by Harmonix and published by RedOctane in 2005, both American companies. Playing along with rock tracks on a plastic guitar offered gamers the opportunity “to unleash their inner rock stars.” And many did. Not only did critics praise the game almost unanimously, it became one of the top-selling titles for the PlayStation 2 in the 2005 holiday season. One of the world's leading game publishers, Activision, took notice and was quick to acquire RedOctane in 2006 for \$100 million in cash and stock. Around the same time, MTV Games acquired Harmonix, and in 2007 they published a competing franchise called *Rock Band*. For Activision, the goal of the acquisition was clear. Together with the first-person shooter franchise *Call of Duty*, the *Guitar Hero* franchise was slated to become one of the publisher's billion-dollar properties.

There were two main elements of Activision's franchising strategy for the *Guitar Hero* series. First, *Guitar Hero* epitomizes what economists call a “blockbuster

publishing logic,” signaling a mode of production and circulation that is associated with high (financial) risk and, potentially, high reward. As do movie studios, game publishers tend not so much to “divide their resources evenly across products in [their] portfolio” but rather to allocate “a disproportionately large share of [their] production and marketing budgets to a small subset of products” in order to bring in a disproportionate revenue share.¹² The blockbuster strategy is all about making this as safe a bet as possible by focusing on “proven strategies.” This means that instead of developing and publishing original intellectual property, the publisher concentrates on the largest potential market in order to expand its margins by “growing recurring franchises.”¹³

This brings us to the second aspect of what makes the *Guitar Hero* franchise so relevant from an economic point of view. Because shelf space in retail stores is limited and gamers constantly seek out new experiences, AAA games are impact-upon-release products and have a fairly short life cycle. Therefore, publishers such as Activision deploy a number of complementary “de-risking” strategies aimed at extending the longevity of an individual title and prolonging the monetization process in-between titles, thereby expanding both the publisher’s and the franchise’s brand. In order to add a layer of predictability to the creative stage of game development, publishers typically employ so-called formatting strategies, which are best understood as a combination of reusable, uniform, economic and textual structures.¹⁴ Seen in this light, the *Guitar Hero* franchise is essentially a de-risking approach to game publishing gone wild.

Activision used five formatting strategies for *Guitar Hero*. First, there was the most common format: serialization. From 2005 to 2010 the franchise saw six releases, all published annually during the holiday seasons. Second, leveraging the affordances of the seventh-generation of consoles (the Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, and Wii), every main installment saw a number of what I call “branch serialization” formats. The notion of branching signals pieces of additional content that expand on the original games, most notably paid-for and free downloadable content such as individual songs and “packs”—and for *Guitar Hero World Tour* (2008), user-generated content. Third, the series saw a number of band-focused expansions released in-between the holidays, expansions such as *Guitar Hero: Aerosmith* (2008). Fourth, Activision went on to follow what business scholars call a “multi-homing approach,” or what is known in the industry as a “multi-platform release strategy”; for example, *Guitar Hero: On Tour* (2008) was released with its own peripheral for the Nintendo DS handheld console. And fifth, later franchise installments followed the “variation on a theme” routine in an attempt to broaden the market. Consider that Activision’s 2009 publishing slate consisted not only *Guitar Hero 5*, targeting “the rock-focused music gamer,” but also the spin-off *DJ Hero*, which was aimed at “club dance” enthusiasts, and the pop-music-focused *Band Hero* (2009), which was meant to “appeal to a family audience.”

This franchising strategy initially paid off handsomely for Activision and its shareholders. The series peaked in 2007 with *Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock*, which, as promised to investors, generated over \$1 billion in revenue. At the time, this third major installment in the series was the highest-grossing retail game ever. Yet despite generating billions of dollars of revenue for Activision, the publisher closed many of the individual studios working on the series: RedOctane in 2010,

Budcat Creations in 2010, Underground Development in 2010, and Neversoft in 2014. In the end, the franchise shows how fickle the taste of users can be, how opportunistic Activision's release strategy was, and also how, arguably, audiences can get quickly tired of serialized properties. Eventually, after a brief hiatus, the franchise was "rebooted," and *Guitar Hero Live* was launched in October 2015 to lukewarm sales. The show, as they say, must go on.

Similar Franchises: *Call of Duty* (2003), *Dance Dance Revolution* (1998), *Rock Band* (2007)

—David B. Nieborg

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