

PLAYSTATION 3 | XBOX 360 | Wii | PLAYSTATION 2

> STYLE 1 TO 4-PLAYER MUSIC (4-PLAYER ONLINE)

> PUBLISHER ACTIVISION

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GUITAR HERO 4

Rock n' Roll
Fantasy Meets Reality

The Beatles vs. The Stones. Nirvana vs. Pearl Jam. Oasis vs. Blur. Throughout history, clashes between some of the world's greatest bands have helped define the music that we know and love. While the great rivalries of old have faded out in the post-downloading era (The Killers vs. The Bravery isn't exactly Metallica vs. Megadeth, is it?), video games are currently home to one of the great musical battles of all time. Neversoft's *Guitar Hero III* and Harmonix's *Rock Band* were enormous hits last year, and each brought fans some of the most entertaining gaming sessions in recent memory. While Harmonix is still considered by many to be the innovator in the field, Neversoft and Activision have been hard at work creating an entirely new *Guitar Hero* experience. We recently got a chance to get a world-exclusive first look at the next *Guitar Hero* title, a game that hopes to change music games forever and restore *Guitar Hero's* claim to the cutting edge. What we found is much more than a mere sequel, and might be the next great step forward in the genre.



Shredding History

How quickly things change. Think back just three years ago: Music games were a niche genre in the U.S. dominated by Konami's Bemani arcade games and its following of hardcore devotees obsessed with Dance Dance Revolution. Red Octane was an obscure peripheral manufacturer, known for redesigning Konami's home dance pad and its own DDR knockoff for PS2, Into the Groove. Harmonix was a critically respected and commercially moribund gaming studio, relying on its modest success with Konami's Karaoke Revolution games to keep afloat following the commercial failures of its PS2 cult hits Frequency and Amplitude. Neversoft was the force behind wildly successful but aging Tony Hawk franchise, which was struggling to find its way on the next generation of systems after being one of the dominant franchises of the PS2 era.

Then, in November of 2005, Guitar Hero was released, a game that would forever change the fates of all these companies. The game (published by Red Octane) was an instant hit, quickly spawning an even more successful sequel. Suddenly, music games were at the forefront of an industry looking for ways to win the hearts of the vast number of casual consumers who had yet to become hooked on video games. With success came the usual business wrangling, as the various companies involved struggled to secure their stake in the future of this blossoming new genre. Activision moved first, acquiring Red Octane (the brains behind the game's groundbreaking guitar controller) and the Guitar Hero brand name. MTV scooped up Harmonix, the company widely seen as the creative force behind the franchise, and signed a partnership with EA to develop an all-new Harmonix-created music game, Rock Band.

Now faced with creating a new Guitar Hero game without the help of Harmonix, Activision went to its stable and awarded the task of creating Guitar Hero III to Neversoft, one of its most consistent and able developers. Soon, both Harmonix, with its ambitious Rock Band, and Neversoft were locked in competition to determine who would control the future of this rapidly evolving style of gaming.

Not surprisingly, given the talent of the companies involved, there was no clear winner to the axe-slinging showdown staged during the holiday season of last year. Despite the fact that they had been forced to quickly adapt to an entirely new genre, Neversoft's Guitar Hero III was remarkably polished, and continued to focus on the series' core of wild guitar antics. Harmonix pushed an expansive (and expensive) title that focused on full-band, four-player action, with a specially designed electronic drum peripheral and

the addition of live vocals. While Guitar Hero won the sales race – by January of this year it had become the fastest \$1 billion franchise in gaming history – the critical perception was that Harmonix and Rock Band had done more to push the genre forward.

This time around, however, Neversoft has its sights set on not only achieving the status quo, but shattering it to pieces. Guitar Hero 4 represents perhaps the most ambitious game in the history of the company. While it's clear Neversoft has kept a studious eye on what its major competitor has achieved in the last year, its goal is to not just match what Harmonix has done, but to create the ultimate music game.

"We want to move everything forward – every single element of the game," claims Neversoft's studio development director Scott Pease. "That's what we've done for 10 years. Guitar Hero III was a big learning experience for us, just learning how to do it. This [GH 4] is the unleashing of all the technology we've had in other games coming to bear on this thing. As you can see, it's going to be five times the game GH III was."

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■ As you can see, the possibilities for creating custom guitars are endless



■ Extensive motion capture sessions give the game's characters a more fluid and varied set of animations



■ Here we see the facepaint options being put to good use



■ As in Guitar Hero: Aerosmith, the characters interact with each other to a much greater degree



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Forming The Band

For most people the biggest news surrounding Guitar Hero 4 will be instantly obvious: like Rock Band, this is now a full band game, complete with drums, bass, vocals, and guitar. While this news isn't a complete surprise (it's been rumored from various sources since the release of the last game), it will be welcome news to the core fanbase, especially those who haven't yet shelled out for its competitor. While many will see this as Neversoft yet again following in the footsteps of Rock Band, the idea of doing a game based on other instruments has actually been percolating within Activision and Neversoft since before Guitar Hero III.

"The natural evolution of the game is to add more instruments," observes Neversoft co-founder Joel Jewitt. "It's not like [Harmonix] even invented that. That's been out there for years in the arcades."

Project director Brian Bright revealed that a Drum Hero game had been in development at fellow Activision studio Activision Foster City (formerly Z-Axis). To help out with the project, Activision hired the services of John Devecka, the man who insiders credit as creating the very first music game, MTV Drumscape, an arcade drum simulation that was released back in 1996. Interestingly, Devecka actually patented technology that has been used in all following music games, including Guitar Hero, Rock Band, and Konami's Dance Dance Revolution — patents which Activision now owns. After Neversoft took the reins of the franchise, the Drum Hero project was rolled into the Guitar Hero fold. The end result is an all-new Guitar Hero drum kit (made with the help of Devecka) that Neversoft feels will raise the bar in both quality and functionality.

"One of the things we really wanted to do was make it quieter than our competitor's kit," comments Bright. "The drums are loud as hell and it's distracting. Everyone else in the room is like 'Shut up!' We also wanted to be able to send along velocity data. We know how hard you hit all six, including the pedal."

Yes, he said "six." That's because Guitar Hero is adding another pad to the kit: one of the two specially placed, dedicated cymbal pads. Instead of looking to emulate the Rock Band kit, the team took its inspiration from actual MIDI compatible professional electronic kits, which they feel are better and more natural feeling in both design and build quality.

Instead of four level pads, you'll now have two elevated, pie-shaped cymbal pads. While this may seem like a small thing, it succeeds in making the experience of drumming feel even more real than in Rock Band.

"We really wanted the elevation, so you feel like you're really playing cymbals. It feels different than all pads being the same. Also for lefties, they can play with the other one for the high hat," says Bright.

Although we didn't get to play with the new kit (playtesting is being done on a professional electronic kit rigged up to an Xbox 360 controller), we were encouraged to grab the sticks and bang on the first-run prototype in the Neversoft offices. Our initial impression was very positive; the placement of the cymbals was very comfortable and the pads were quieter, while at the same time providing a more natural bounce for things like drum rolls. Neversoft guarantees that the unit will be extremely durable. "The team we're working with has been making hardware for years and years," comments Bright. "These guys know it inside out. This thing is not going to crack."

In even better news, those sick of Rock Band's tangle of cords will be pleased to note that — like all the game's peripherals — the drum kit will be fully wireless.

The team we're working with has been making hardware for years and years...These guys know it inside out. This thing is not going to crack.

— Brian Bright

■ The drum's sturdier construction and dedicated cymbal pads give it a more realistic feel than Rock Band's kit



■ Check out the detailed facial animations; the lip syncing is extremely accurate

Be Your Own Rockstar

In keeping with the addition of more instrument options, Neversoft envisions Guitar Hero 4 as a completely open-ended music fantasy. As opposed to past titles, which were essentially a list of songs with some modes thrown on top, this time around every aspect of the game lets players choose how they want to present themselves to the world and how they progress through their rock career. "Player freedom" is clearly the buzzword surrounding the development of the title, and this manifests itself in a number of intriguing ways.

It starts in a brand new Create-a-Rocker mode, which is the deepest and most complex character creator we've seen in a music game to date. Here, Neversoft draws not only on its own experience with Tony Hawk, but also takes some inspiration from a surprising source.

"We've had Create-A-Skater in our games since 2000, so it was a natural step for us to make Create-a-Rocker," said Bright. "One thing that we did was take a look at Tiger Woods, which is a benchmark as far as we're concerned for facial deformation and options that they give people. We've never had that in Tony Hawk. We've had body scaling, but we never had the facial stuff. We've got that in now."

Using a system of sliders familiar to anyone who's played Tiger or a number of other games, you can start from a few basic character archetypes (which the game categorizes by musical genre, like black metal, goth, glam, etc.) and alter everything from the size of your nose to the prominence of your cheekbones. You can even age your characters ("In case you want to make The Rolling Stones," jokes Bright), alter their physique, and create customized outfits down to the smallest accessories. Using a simple editor, you can even create custom tattoos and face paint



■ The customization options will mean no two characters ever look alike



■ Explore your inner goth!

The Mystery Axe

While Neversoft was definitely excited to show us all the ins and outs of its new baby, at least one major part of the Guitar Hero equation, the all-new guitar controller Red Octane has designed for the game, had to remain a secret due to a mandate sent down from Activision's legal department. What we do know is this: The controller will have at least one major new feature, which will directly impact the way you play Guitar Hero in the future. "We've been brainstorming on ways to make the guitar as expressive as a real guitar," hints Scott Pease.

However, we received at least one clue as to how this new guitar will impact gameplay. While playing guitar during a four-player session, we noticed strings of see-through notes coming down the guitar runway. When pressed, Neversoft's Chris Parise explained, "Those see-through notes [are for] a totally new input mechanic on the new guitar. Unfortunately, we can't talk about it today."

Suddenly Brian Bright jumped in, claiming, "It's so f— rad, we're trying to patent the s—. We're getting some legal stuff taken care of." This caused company head Jewitt to joke, "We don't want you to run out and make one on your own."

Although we have no hard facts, given that the current guitar offers hammer-ons, whammy bar, and conventional fretting, maybe this new input mode could augment your shredding arsenal with fret-sliding or perhaps brief windows for improvisation? Regardless, expect this new controller to change the way you play Guitar Hero. However, we have been assured that you can play and complete the game with any previously compatible Guitar Hero controller, although you might miss out on certain gameplay features.



■ Fun fact: Miller has this exact same tattoo!

“We’ve had Create-A-Skater in our games since 2000, so it was a natural step for us to make Create-a-Rocker.”

— Brian Bright

designs of anywhere from a planned 10 to a possible 32 layers of artwork. And, as in Tiger, you can even choose some of your character’s animations, like how they react to a win or loss.

If you’d rather stick with some classic characters from Guitar Hero’s past, you’ll have that option as well. During our demo we saw such fan favorites as Axel Steel, Judy Nails, Johnny Napalm, Lars Umlaut, Izzy Sparks, and Midori. Hardcore followers will be pleased to know that the game also marks the return of Clive Winston and Pandora. You’ll even be able to swap different characters’ outfits for the first time in Guitar Hero. Wonder what Axel looks like in a miniskirt?

It’s pretty impressive, and that’s only the beginning. In the wake of Activision’s very public falling out with Gibson, licensed guitars have been nixed in favor of an extensive guitar editor. As with your character, you’ll be able to tweak every minute detail of your axe, choosing from scores of body shapes, headstocks, finishes, fret inlays, pickup configurations, knobs, pick guards – you name it, you can change it. Once again, you’ll also be able to create custom guitar graphics in addition to the myriad of preset images.

“When you go online, you want your character to be different from everyone else’s, to be an extension of you,” says Scott Pease. “That goes for the guitars as well. You’ll be able to recognize people by their guitars.”

While options for customizing drums aren’t as varied as those for guitar, you will be able to select the style of hardware, finish, and size of your drums, and even affix your bass drum head with a custom-made band logo that will be displayed throughout the game’s various venues.



Some of the venues are less epic than others

On The Road To Stardom

Neversoft’s commitment to giving the player more relevant options extends to the career structure as well. Guitar Hero’s traditional career has been thrown out the window – a move that effectively breaks down the barriers between single-player, online, and band career modes.

“Before the career mode was just this linear list. Now, there’s this band fiction,” describes Chris Parise. “You have multiple gigs on a board you can go to, and each one will have a set list of songs for a particular place. That’s the same for single-player as it is for band mode. You pick the gig you want, play through it, and there will be more to play. You pick the way you want to go. If there’s a song that you don’t want to play – even though all our songs will be awesome – you don’t have to play that song. It’s a more open-ended adventure.”

Brian Bright is more blunt in his assessment of the difference between the career mode in Guitar Hero 4 and Rock Band: “Well, I thought we could be better [than Rock Band] by not making you play the same three f— songs 2,000 times over and over. I don’t want to hear Nirvana and Weezer ever again. I’m so sick of it!”

To help ease frustrations and ensure that players are constantly encountering new songs and challenges, Neversoft has broken most of the rules that restricted progression in previous music games. Brian Bright gave us an example of how this works. “You can start a drum career with this wonderful lady I’ve made here [in Create-a-Rocker],” says Bright. “You can start playing in Medium and, if you get to a song you’re having a hard time with, you could finish that song in Easy if you wanted to – without starting a new career. You could also jump to guitar and play that song with that same character within the same

career. You take one character and try to finish the four instrument careers and the band career with the one character you’ve made to really max out your career earnings and unlock all the hidden challenges and milestones.”

You’ll also have more options in how you progress through the band career. As in Rock Band, each band is anchored by a band leader. However, unlike in Rock Band, the leader can freely switch between any instrument. Whether by yourself, online, or offline with friends, you’ll always be able to advance your band’s fortunes in the world of virtual rock. When you’re playing in a friend’s band online, you’ll still reap the rewards of success. For example, if your friend is advanced past you in the game, you’ll still earn the extras you’ve unlocked for certain milestones, even if you haven’t actually progressed to that point in your own career.

Neversoft is a bit vague as to how you’ll unlock new items and songs in the game, although we do know that, as in previous games, you’ll be earning cash for almost everything you do – and the team promises enough Achievements, goals, and milestones to keep players busy for weeks.

Take The Stage

While Neversoft is clearly intent on making a number of improvements and additions to what was accomplished in Rock Band – including some rather mindblowing ones we’ve yet to mention – there’s also a bit of a feeling of déjà vu one feels when first tackling a four-player session of Guitar Hero 4. Perhaps sensing that it’s folly to fix something that isn’t broken, the onscreen HUD for multiplayer is essentially identical to that of Rock Band. The three main instruments – guitar,

bass, and drums – scroll vertically down the lower half of the screen, while the vocal line rolls across the top from left to right. For our money, it was the right decision. The system as is works perfectly, and allows fans of both franchises to jump in and instantly feel at home.

However, as with the career mode, a number of clever changes have been implemented to make the experience more exciting for a wider variety of gamers. One such example is the new Easy Rhythm guitar difficulty, one targeted for parents who want to let their children in on the fun. Instead of the usual pattern of descending “jewels,” Easy Rhythm is a series of straight lines (usually used to represent the bass drum hits) that go in time to the beat of the song, allowing kids to strum along regardless of what neck buttons are being pressed.

The bass and drum mechanics have also been tweaked to make them more complex for advanced players and, in the case of the drums, allow for more creativity and improvisation. Bass also makes use of the straight line across for “open notes,” essentially simulating the open E string on the real-life instrument. It’s a clever addition and definitely makes for some more interesting note runs and a feel much more akin to actually playing the instrument. Which



Tattoos, facepaint, band logos, and album art are all created with the same intuitive editor



■ The character creator allows for you to craft bands that are outside of Guitar Hero's traditionally metal-centric aesthetic



■ In the studio, you and your friends can freely jam on any of the game's tracks



■ After you create a custom scale, you can instantly set the whole band to play on the same note pattern and key

is good, since there is (finally) a unique bass career mode in the game. For the drums, Neversoft is taking full advantage of the kit's dual cymbals by changing how Star Power is activated. Instead of Rock Band's somewhat awkward use of fills to activate power mode, you can now activate it by crashing both cymbals at once in true rockstar fashion. At that point, you're given a brief moment to improv your own fill, allowing you to be adventurous without worrying about hitting the tricky last beat on time.

Neversoft also has big plans to distinguish the drum career track from its string-slinging counterparts. No arena rock show is complete without an indulgent drum solo, and rest assured you won't have to miss out on the fun of unleashing your inner Keith Moon. "When you're playing drums by yourself, the encores will have these special sections that are solos," reveals Bright. "The lights will fade, the camera will pan to the drummer, the rest of the band will fade out, and there will be an extended drum solo."

"The idea is that it will be like the Tommy Lee spotlight solo, with pyro and lights going off. It'll be like

big moment for the drummer," adds Pease. While the solos will rest solely on improvisation, the game will grade you according to how on-beat your fills were and the variety in the pads that you hit.

Neversoft is also tackling one of the more controversial elements of Guitar Hero III: the boss battles, which many critics and fans found frustrating. Rather than abandon them entirely, the team has re-focused them away from attack power-ups and towards the core of what makes Guitar Hero so much fun.

"You're still going to be playing with some real life guitar heroes," comments Neversoft's Alan Flores. "But we're going to change the way it's done. It's more about playing and less about attack. It's a more call-and-response style. But we will still have a Battle Mode for online, because it's really popular with the fans."

A Cornucopia of Rock

Another area which Neversoft promises the game will excel in is the in the music selection – and, more importantly, support for downloadable content, which

has been less than stellar so far for Guitar Hero III.

"We're going to support this in a big way with DLC, something we haven't been the best at with Guitar Hero III," observes Bright. "Some of that is because we as a studio have been focused on this game and Guitar Hero: Aerosmith. It takes a couple of guys a few weeks to do a song. We're now working with some other resources to help us do downloadable content."

"You have to have the licensing and everything all lined up. Last year, we were basically trying to get GH III out and were still learning about it. Now, we have everything in place. We're definitely more prepared, and we have more people making the games," comments Pease.

Of course, any downloadable content would be adding on to the game's built-in track listing, which Neversoft aims to make the best ever in the music genre. "[We'll have] more songs than we've ever put in a Guitar Hero game, more than any other disc-based music game. And they're all master tracks, and a lot of triple-A bands. We're going balls-out," claims Bright. For fear of getting scooped by the competition, they

refused to discuss specific tracks, but would confirm the inclusion of songs by four bands: Van Halen, The Eagles, Linkin Park, and Sublime. This listing reflects the team's desire to make the soundtrack more varied, reaching outside of Guitar Hero's usual metal-centric aesthetic.

"We've actually got a pretty even split between late '80s, '90s, and classic rock. It's a little harder to find modern stuff, but we do have a good amount of emerging bands," reveals Bright. But that's not to say the franchise's core group of guitar-heads has been ignored. "We have a handful of songs that are specific to the hardcore guitar players – a few progressive bands like Dream Theater. We have to put them in the game," Bright continues.

Blazing A Trail

Speculating about who will and won't be on the soundtrack of a new Guitar Hero game is an entertaining pastime. (Yes, we asked about Led Zepelin. No, they didn't answer.) But what if we told you the most exciting music in Guitar Hero 4 hasn't even been written yet? That's because Neversoft is aiming for something much greater than just another improvement on the same old formula. This time, they are giving players the tools to go beyond just emulating the artists they love and pursue their own path to musical stardom. Here's where things start to get really interesting.

Neversoft, like many of us, has paid close attention to the community of Guitar Hero hackers that has blossomed online, populated by enthusiasts who've used the modified controllers and debug menus to create a plethora of unlicensed versions of thousands of tracks. However, this time around, no homebrew solutions will be necessary. Guitar Hero 4's studio mode will give players the tools they need to create literally any song they can imagine.

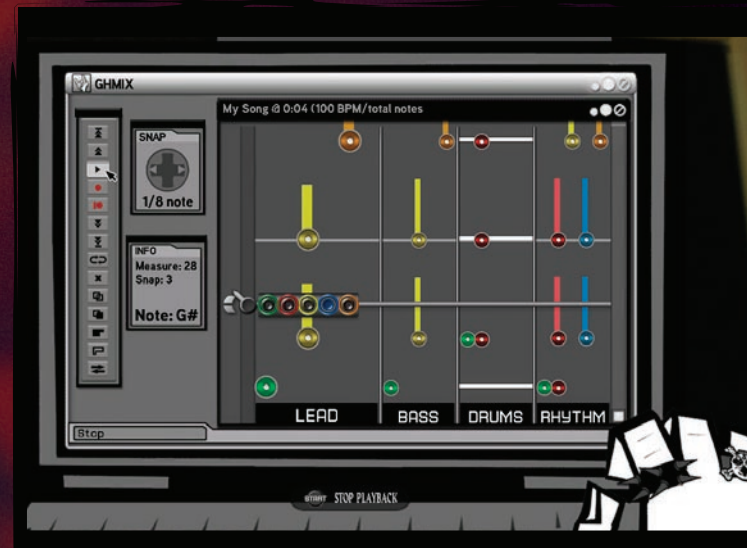
The first layer of this expansive mode is called Jam Over, which allows players to get their feet wet in a live band setting. Simply enter the studio, select one of the songs from the soundtrack, and you and your friends will be able to freely jam with preloaded chords and scales from that track. Whatever tracks aren't being played live will be streamed from the prerecorded track, letting you learn how to play the song without the use of the note runway, or create your own riffs and chord progressions on the fly. It also allows you to be more creative with leads, as the guitar's tilt function allows you to instantly switch between a higher and lower octave. In the studio is also where you'll notice the significance of the velocity sensitive drums, as each pad will have four different samples that are tiered based on how hard you hit, allowing you to go from a light drum roll to a massive thwack of the snare in an instant.

Once you've got your chops nailed down, you'll be able to record your version of a rock classic (sans vocals) and have it instantly playable in Quick Play mode.

But the real possibilities begin to open up in the Advanced Studio mode, a full recording toolset that rivals such computer programs as Apple's popular

Garage Band software. In this mode, you have total freedom to write, arrange, and record songs as you see fit. A vertically scrolling grid shows the song's various tracks – rhythm, lead, melody, bass, and drums. You can craft your songs by recording live playing (with a little help from the game, which automatically "quantizes" or corrects offbeat notes to quarter, 8th, or 16th notes, and so on), or by "step recording," in which you place individual drum hits or notes on the grid one by one. It's also possible to create loops which can then be copied and pasted ad infinitum, a feature which is handy for drum and bass composition.

The guitar options are nearly endless in Advanced Studio. You'll have a host of amp sounds and effects



pedals, and the ability to create and assign custom scales to the different buttons and combos on the neck. Three-button combos even allow instant access to acoustic tones. Drums are equally flexible, allowing you to select from a huge selection of conventional kits, then quickly hit the back button for Latin-style percussion sounds.

The only real limitation is the lack of vocals – the storage needs for recorded vocals and possible copyright concerns were cited as the reasons for the inability to record your singing. That said, you can use keyboard tones on the melody track to emulate the vocal lines for most songs.

All in all, it's a remarkably easy-to-use system, one that should generate a ton of unique user-created content (and probably more than a few less-than-legal "cover" versions of classic rock tunes). To showcase the creativity of their audience, Neversoft has added a completely new online community to the game, called GH Tunes, a free content sharing service it hopes will become the YouTube of music video games.

Once you've recorded your original masterpiece, all you have to do is save it to your hard drive, name the track, and create some custom album artwork. Then, it can be uploaded to GH Tunes, where users from around the world can play and rate your creation (all songs are instantly translated into the familiar "jewel" system for playback). For Neversoft, the possibilities of the studio mode are endless.

"There are people that will go pretty hardcore into this mode," predicts Neversoft's Travis Chen. "These are the guys that make custom Guitar Hero III songs just with the cheats menu. You see videos of them playing

full songs with that, and that was pretty limited. Now it's open to everyone, where before you had to hack your PS2. Even someone that doesn't want to play Jam Over or use the studio, they still get a big bonus because of those five percent of really awesome songs that are going up that they can play."

At first, you'll be limited to uploading five original tracks to the GH Tunes service. However, through a system of user ratings, certain players who deliver consistently high quality tracks will "get signed," allowing them to upload 10 and possibly even more songs at a time. The GH Tunes navigation system will allow you to sort the wheat from the chaff, highlighting new additions, highest-rated tracks, and popular songwriters from the fan community. Neversoft is also planning on curating its own Showcase section to highlight some of the best contributors. While Neversoft did confirm that studio mode would be included in the PS2 and Wii versions of the game, it seems unlikely that the online sharing will be as robust.

"Showcase is our own section," comments Brian Bright. "We could put real artists in there; we could put songs that our designers and artists have made. We could potentially pick out user songs and move them to our list."

The possibilities seem endless. If there's anything that the Internet era has taught us, it's that giving people ways to use their creativity online and connect with each other can lead to results much greater than anything you could have imagined beforehand. Just picture a community of thousands of Guitar Hero enthusiasts – both professional and amateur – writing, recording, and freely sharing tracks through an easy-to-use infrastructure. "It's struck me in the last few weeks that we might be sitting on something that's bigger than I have any concept about," predicts Joel Jewitt.

Shooting For Immortality

In the time we spent with the team at Neversoft, two things became abundantly clear. One, this is a highly competitive studio that is not content to sit back and merely preserve the commercially bankable Guitar Hero formula. Two, it was that Neversoft, which has always had a close relationship with its fanbase since the early days of Tony Hawk, are a company that listens to the criticism from both its fans and the press, and is attempting to deliver to the public the music game they've been dreaming about for years.

"This is the future," claims Joel Jewitt. "We're going to make the best game we can with all the tools, so you guys can do everything. And then keep it going with all the music and master tracks that you guys love. It's a lot of fun.... I'm getting giddy about this one."

With their years of experience in a variety of genres, a core of extremely talented veteran staff, and one successful Guitar Hero title already under its belt, Neversoft seems to be poised to challenge Harmonix and Rock Band as the innovators in the music game genre. Has the student become the teacher? It's too early to say, but it's safe to predict that music fans will all benefit from the results of what's shaping up to be one of gaming's all-time great rivalries. ■■■