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Metallica test magnetic appeal of gaming industry



Metallica are releasing their first new album in five years as a CD and computer game, enabling fans to play along

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For years, heavy metal fans have played along to their music with their air guitars turned up to 11, but yesterday they were given the chance to “virtually” join in with Metallica on their new album *Death Magnetic*.

The veteran rockers broke new ground by releasing their first album in five years simultaneously as a CD and as a computer game, making the album and bonus material available via Activision's *Guitar Hero III* for about £8.

Guitar Hero allows fans to play along to their favourite songs using a specially designed plastic guitar, and the special version of *Death Magnetic* features extended solos by James Hetfield and Kirk Hammett on the song *Suicide & Redemption* – air/ virtual guitar heaven, for the head-banging cognoscenti.

Metallica are signed to Vivendi's Universal Music in Europe, while Activision, *Guitar Hero's* publisher, is also majority-owned by Vivendi, after an \$18 billion (£10 billion) merger this year. The link between the two reflects a growing view that computer games offer a route to the music industry's eventual recovery.

Tim Riley, Activision's vice-president for music affairs, said this week that his company was “proud to be setting a precedent for our two industries”. The games company is working on a special Metallica version of its game, after an Aerosmith version that grossed at least \$50 million.

Guitar Hero is only one of three games that dominate the sector. The others are Viacom's *Rock Band*, its principal rival, and *SingStar*, from Sony, which is a karaoke game in which people compete to hit the most number of correct notes.

Liam Quigely, *SingStar's* product manager, said: “These games are popular because they are social. People can come together and sing their favourite songs both after – and before – going to the pub.” This week *SingStar* unveiled a tie-up with Abba and will be making all the Swedish group's hits available on a special version of the game in November.

Critically for the music industry, game owners are keen to buy songs to sing or play along to online. An estimated 20 million songs have been bought by *Guitar Hero* owners to test their strumming skills; *SingStar* reports that 2.2 million songs, which cost 99p each in Britain, have been downloaded.

Those figures give hope to a beleaguered music industry, although this summer Edgar Bronfman, the Warner Music boss, said that the music industry was not getting the royalties that it wanted from game owners.

Ed Barton, an analyst with Screen Digest, said: “If the commercial terms were not attractive for the music industry, they wouldn't keep coming back, again and again, to reach agreements with the games makers.”

Worldwide sales figures show how popular music games have become and the cost of the plastic instruments helps to lift the price. *Guitar Hero*, in all editions, has sold 20.7 million worldwide, according to Screen Digest, the industry analysts. A new version, *World Tour*, is due this year.

The most recent version of *Guitar Hero* costs £45 and the guitar, if needed, another £55. Other instruments can be bought, too. *Rock Band*, a newer game, has sold 1.3 million globally.

SingStar's sales outside the United States are 13 million, although the game is not available in Japan as in that country nobody sings karaoke at home because of concerns about disturbing the neighbours. Quite what the neighbours will make of Metallica at full volume is unclear.

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