

Dance Dance Revolution: A True Revolution

Introduction

This is not your typical arcade game. It stands at a height of eight feet, two feet larger than most arcade cabinets. Lights shine down as dance music thumps out of the two large speakers on the cabinet's base. There is no joystick or array of circular buttons; instead, you stand on a metal platform with four pressure panels beneath your feet and a handbar behind you. A set of stationary arrows is at the top of the screen, while other arrows rise from the bottom. Each one corresponds to a direction (up, left, down, or right), and as each one reaches the top, you step on the corresponding panel – stomp, stomp, stomp. The steps match the beats of the song, and the game tells you how good your timing is (words like “Perfect,” “Great,” or “Miss” flash on-screen as each arrow floats off the screen). Welcome to *Dance Dance Revolution*.

At a time when the arcade industry was shrinking, video games were under fire for violent content, and music games were relatively unsuccessful, *Dance Dance Revolution* defied all expectations and became the biggest coin-op craze of recent times. It has evolved into a cultural phenomenon, making appearances in news articles, talk shows, a Skechers commercial, and television shows such as FOX's *King of the Hill*. In many ways, it has risen above most video games in the public consciousness. But most importantly, *Dance Dance Revolution* has largely developed into a social arena with its own communities and cultures.

Dance Dance Revolution's History

In 1996, Sony Computer Entertainment released the Playstation title *PaRappa the Rapper* in Japan¹. At the time, it was the only game of its kind. Resembling a video game form of the

children's toy Simon, *PaRappa* required players to copy button sequences to a musical beat. Hitting the right buttons on beat made the character PaRappa rap with the rhythm, leading to higher scores, while poor timing led to "failure." Players were graded on their accuracy, advancing to the next level by "passing" each song. The game was soon wildly popular in Japan, and so far has sold 1.47 million copies to date, according to the website The Magic Box. More importantly, though, *PaRappa*'s success paved the way for the music game genre.

Music games rapidly exploded in Japan. Sony followed up in 1999 with *Um Jammer Lammy*, a sequel to *PaRappa* with a rock flavor, also for the Playstation console. Enix released a similar Playstation title in 1998 called *Bust A Move*, which featured characters dancing instead of rapping or playing music. Also in 1998, Konami released its first arcade music game, *Beatmania*, which utilized a mini-keyboard and a turntable as its controls. The genre grew so much that music games accounted for almost 15% of the top 100 games sold in Japan in 1999 (The Gaming Chronicle).

In the U.S., however, the music game genre followed a very different path. The U.S. version of *PaRappa* (released in November 1997) had some success, selling 250,000 copies by the year 2000 (Wong), but it was hardly the hit it had been in Japan. Subsequent music games fared no better, but some managed to find small niche markets. It seemed that the genre held little appeal to Americans.

Soon after *Beatmania*'s release, Konami introduced *Dance Dance Revolution* to Japanese arcades in October 1998. It quickly took the country by storm, overshadowing the earlier success of *Beatmania*. Its success cemented the popularity of Konami's series of music games (known as Bemani, short for *Beatmania*) – in the fiscal year ending March 1999, Konami saw its net income soar by almost 260 percent, largely due to its Bemani franchise (Wong).

Then Konami decided to release *Dance Dance Revolution* in the U.S. in 1999. Response at trade shows was encouraging, but the low popularity of music games discouraged many arcade owners, especially when the machines were among the most expensive in the market, priced at approximately \$15,500 apiece (Tran). The skepticism was soon replaced with surprise, though, once arcades began installing the machines. At the Southern Hills Golfland in Stanton, California, the machine collected \$40,000 in tokens within less than fifteen months (Tran). Even more amazingly, the Sony Metreon arcade in San Francisco expected only 30 plays a day, but the machine racked up 4,000 plays in the first month – at a whopping \$4 per play (Lieu).

Demand for the game boomed. By 2000, Konami had sold a “triple-digit” number of machines in North America and was scrambling to meet demand. Many arcades began importing cabinets from Japan, especially because the Japanese always had the newer versions first, leading to a dramatic increase in the availability of *Dance Dance Revolution*. Just over a year after its debut, the game was available in less than a dozen states (Tran). Two years later, in August 2002, the game had spread to 1192 locations in 48 states. In June 2003, the number had increased to 1572 locations in 49 states, and currently *Dance Dance Revolution* can be found in 1901 locations in all 50 states. California has always had the most, and is currently home to 442 of those locations. Texas is second with 145 locations² (DDR Freak).

What made *Dance Dance Revolution* so popular, when so many other music games had failed? When asked, players have given a variety of reasons: the music, the fun of dancing, the appeal of reflex games, the challenge, and the aerobic benefits, among others. Although these have been important, they seem insufficient in explaining the game’s enormous success. Indeed, had these been the only reasons, *Dance Dance Revolution* would probably have quickly

disappeared as the novelty wore off. More likely, *Dance Dance Revolution*'s success was largely a result of its role as a social medium.

Player Communities Offline and Online

Arcades are often perceived as rooms filled with antisocial teenage males silently concentrating on the screens before them. It has been acknowledged that socializing with strangers in arcades is somewhat of a taboo (Loftus). At the same time, arcades have also been widely accused of being hangouts for delinquent teens and of promoting violent behaviors. In general, arcades were not seen as places for meeting people and making new friends.

As a player, I had avoided arcades partly for those reasons. I preferred playing console games in the comfort of my home, and joysticks had never been intuitive for me. But I had become interested in *Dance Dance Revolution* in January 2000 after reading an article about it, so I began playing with friends at my local Golfland in South El Monte, California. Being a Golfland, it was unlike most arcades, but it still was not really a venue for meeting strangers.

But even when I played at other arcades, I noticed that *Dance Dance Revolution* was different from most games. Players would often mill around the machine, talking to others who were waiting their turns. Even passers-by would watch and sometimes comment to other spectators or players. Regular players were forming friendships through the game, and local legends were being born. *Dance Dance Revolution* also helped bring females into arcades, opening up the social environment.

I occasionally witnessed players at their first try. Usually they were with a group of friends, and one of them would finally work up the courage to play. She (as it usually was) would have to persuade one of her friends to join her, and they would laugh at themselves

throughout the entire song. One time, the friends took a picture of the two players while they posed. *Dance Dance Revolution* was clearly not a typical arcade experience.

As *Dance Dance Revolution* created avid arcade communities, it was also slowly building a presence online. Message boards and websites sprang up as players looked for step charts, playing tips, people to chat with, and perhaps most importantly, locations where they could play. One group of Friday night regulars at the Golfland in Milpitas, California, became friends, and eventually decided to form a website. In March 2000, Jason Ko officially founded the site, having it hosted on a server at UC Berkeley, where he was a student³. The website, called DDR Freak, quickly became a popular resource and social venue for players everywhere. Its message board now boasts over 37,000 registered users⁴. Other online communities emerged, increasingly spreading awareness of the game. At GameFAQs, one of the most popular video game FAQ websites, *Dance Dance Revolution Extreme* (the latest U.S. version) has the second most active message board and the fifth most active FAQ page of all arcade games⁵.

Video Game or Sport?

As players' skills improved and their dedication increased, players began memorizing steps and creating their own techniques and routines. Many would practice extensively, sometimes at home (with imported copies of the Japanese Playstation version), then show off their innovations in front of the arcade crowds. These devoted players surely inspired new waves of players and motivated existing players to become even better.

Arcades noticed the growing interest in the game, and some responded by holding local tournaments. This provided another social forum for *Dance Dance Revolution* players, one in which contestants could directly challenge their stepping skills against those of other players. As

competitions grew, so did the rules, and several contest categories emerged. The most common format, Perfect Attack, rewards players with the highest percentage of “Perfect” steps. Another format, the Freestyle event, is less common because it requires subjective judging, but it has proven to be very popular. Freestylers demonstrate their well-practiced routines, sometimes in pairs, and are judged on their style, creativity, and accuracy. At one tournament, players even dressed up in costumes of *Bust A Move* characters (Smith).

Dance Dance Revolution's status as a tournament-level game indicates its capacity as a social medium. Tournaments provide large-scale settings for players to meet each other and hang out, all while playing their favorite game. And in some places, it has become more than just a video game. In Norway, competitive *Dance Dance Revolution* has become so popular that it will soon be registered as a sport (Twist).

Performance Play

One of the biggest draws of the game is its performance element. *Dance Dance Revolution* is a very physical game that allows for a very wide range of expression and freedom of movement. Players quickly develop their own habits and moves while learning from others. Because the game is based on dancing, an activity familiar to everyone, passers-by become easily engaged as spectators. It seems like every time someone steps on the platform, a crowd is waiting to form.

The tendency for crowds to form has led many players to enjoy playing as a performance. Even admittedly shy players love the attention. Ko himself said, “I was not much of a dancer before this game. I like showing off, getting attention” (Libaw). According to an informal DDR Freak poll, 65% of players considered themselves performers/freestylers⁶. The performance

element has definitely been one of the most popular aspects of the game, from the perspectives of both players and spectators. Players continue to create new routines and show them off, and whenever a freestyler is on stage, he or she is sure to attract attention.

Online communities helped push the popularity of performance play. As competitions grew and more players became good enough to freestyle, performance videos started being distributed online. Players could watch the impressive and creative routines and learn some of the techniques at the same time, increasingly inspiring players to become masters of the game. Professional teams emerged in several countries, and groups such as the A-Team regularly gave public performances and videotaped their routines.

An interesting observation is that local communities developed so strongly that different areas became known for having certain “styles.” Kirsten Maynard, the Metreon’s public relations manager, observed in 2000: “Dancers in Milpitas have a flamboyant style and Sunnyvale is more subdued. But San Francisco is evolving and its style is a combination of the two” (Lieu). I experienced this first-hand when a friend and I played at the Sunnyvale Golfland three years ago. My friend performed a knee drop⁷ in the middle of the song “Butterfly.” Another player commented to us afterwards, “The knee drop is such a Southern California move.”

Conclusion

While many arcade games have suffered from the release of their respective console versions, *Dance Dance Revolution* has continued to enjoy widespread arcade popularity. Although the home versions do not provide the same game experience, some players suggest that the lack of the same social experience is the critical factor. Player communities have been very

important for other games – with online multiplayer games, players socialize through the game and within internet chat rooms or message boards, while also physically socializing via “LAN parties” and PC cafes. Both online and offline communities have helped sustain the popularity of such games.

The social aspect of *Dance Dance Revolution* seems especially significant to its success. There are no other adequate explanations for its phenomenal popularity, especially with consideration to two points. First, the music game genre has still not been very successful in the U.S. Several music games have been released or imported in the U.S., but none have received very much attention from the general public. Even *Britney’s Dance Beat* (released by THQ in 2002 for GameBoy Advance and Playstation 2) has had poor sales, despite Britney Spears’ popularity as a music artist⁸ (Chmielewski).

The second point is the general decline of the coin-op industry. Arcades have been hit hard in recent years – the number of arcades nationwide shrank from 5,000 in 1995 to an estimated 4,000 in the year 2000 (Tran). Many game companies have completely shut down their arcade divisions, including Konami. There are several reasons for this decline, including the increased quality of console games, the cumulative cost of playing arcade games, and the amount of time required to wait in line for a game (1UP). Additionally, arcades in the U.S. are often treated as destinations, whereas in Japan they are typically seen as ways to kill time; this means that players specifically go out to arcades as an activity. Despite these conditions, many *Dance Dance Revolution* players are still willing to make the effort to regularly play in arcades. Fortunately, people in the industry have recognized that the social element is a primary draw for certain coin-op games. As Milind Bharvirkar, CEO of GlobalVR, says, “Online systems at home have some limitations. There’s no social aspect A, and B, there are no money tournaments. We

allow players to compete for money... We understand the value of a player community. They feel like gaming has now turned into a sport for them”¹⁰ (1UP).

Dance Dance Revolution's success in the U.S. was largely unexpected. Because of this, it is important to understand its history. Player communities have shown to be a critical factor in its success; it may not have survived in the U.S. otherwise. Using *Dance Dance Revolution* as a model may provide a basis for creating highly successful games with dedicated fan bases in the future. Only very recently has the social element of video games been more closely examined and taken advantage of, and its importance can not be underestimated, especially for the struggling arcade industry.

Endnotes

- ¹Release dates for mentioned console games are taken from GameFAQs <<http://www.gamefaqs.com/>>.
- ²The current statistic was taken from the DDR Freak Machine Locations page. Statistics for 2002 and 2003 were obtained through Internet Archive: Wayback Machine for the given page: <<http://www.ddrfreak.com/locations/locations.php>>.
- ³Story adapted from DDR Freak's *About DDR Freak* page <<http://www.ddrfreak.com/about.php>>.
- ⁴This number was obtained through the DDR Freak forum Memberlist <<http://www.ddrfreak.com/phpBB2/memberlist.php>>.
- ⁵The GameFAQs website automatically updates its board and FAQ page rankings and is based on page traffic. The cited ranking was obtained through a page access on 16 Mar. 2004 <<http://www.gamefaqs.com/coinop/arcade/index.html>>.
- ⁶This number was obtained through a DDR Freak General Survey. The survey was conducted up to 1 Nov. 2001, and includes 1532 responses <<http://www.ddrfreak.com/statistics.php>>.
- ⁷"Knee drop" is a term referring to a technique where a player lowers his body and hits the panel with the knee instead of stepping on it.
- ⁸According to the article, *Britney's Dance Beat* sold fewer copies than *Mary-Kate and Ashley Magical Mystery Mall*, which sold 286,000 copies.
- ⁹GlobalVR is an arcade game manufacturer (products include EA Sports' *PGA Tour Golf*).

Works Cited

- About DDR Freak*. DDR Freak. 16 Mar. 2004 <<http://www.ddrfreak.com/about.php>>.
- Arcade Games*. GameFAQs. 16 Mar. 2004 <<http://www.gamefaqs.com/coinop/arcade/index.html>>.
- Chmielewski, Dawn C. "Video game industry has a blind spot to females." *The San Jose Mercury News*, 19 Dec. 2002: 1E.
- Libaw, Oliver Yates. "Dancing Arcade Game Draws Huge Crowds." *ABCNEWS.com* 4 Dec. 2000. Archived at <<http://www.ddrfreak.com/newpress/ABC%20News.htm>>
- Lieu, Susan. "DDR: The young and the agile." *San Francisco Examiner*, 22 Sep. 2000.
- Loftus, Geoffrey R., and Elizabeth F. Loftus. *Mind at Play: The Psychology of Video Games*. New York: Basic Books, 1983.
- Machine Locations*. DDR Freak. 16 Mar. 2004 <<http://www.ddrfreak.com/locations/locations.php>>.
- Memberlist*. DDR Freak. 16 Mar. 2004 <<http://www.ddrfreak.com/phpBB2/memberlist.php>>.
- "Music Game Craze Hits Japan, U.S. Next?" *The Gaming Chronicle* 18 Jul. 2000. 16 Mar. 2004 <<http://thegamingchronicle.com/2000.07.18.htm>>.
- Platinum Game Chart, Japanese Console Games Sold Over One Million*.

- The Magic Box: International Videogame News. 16 Mar. 2004
<<http://www.the-magicbox.com/topten2.htm>>.
- Smith, David. "Dance Dance Revolution Tournament Report." *IGN.com*
28 Aug. 2000. 16 Mar. 2004. Archived at
<<http://www.ddrfreak.com/newpress/IGN.com.html>>.
- "State of the U.S. Arcade Industry 2004." *IUP.com*
13 Feb. 2004. 16 Mar. 2004 <<http://www.iup.com/article2/0,2053,1526151,00.asp>>.
- Statistics. DDR Freak. 16 Mar. 2004
<<http://www.ddrfreak.com/statistics.php>>.
- Tran, Khanh T.L. "In the Latest Arcade Craze, Players Demonstrate Their Fancy Footwork."
The Wall Street Journal, 16 Aug. 2000.
- Twist, Jo. "Playing games on the dance floor." *BBC News, UK Edition*, 3 Feb. 2004.
- Wong, Nicole C. "Hip-hop music sweeps arcades with 'Dance Dance Revolution.'"
The San Jose Mercury News, 22 Jul. 2000: 1E.