

E3 BUZZ: Rock returns; Kanye and other stars come to play

June 19 2015, by Lou Kesten

Some closing craziness on the final day of the Electronic Entertainment Expo in Los Angeles:

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Toward the end of the last decade, "Rock Band" and "Guitar Hero" owned E3. The "Rock Band" team got The Who to perform a free concert in 2008. "Guitar Hero" publisher Activision topped that in 2010 by taking over the Staples Center for an all-star jam with Eminem, Rihanna, Usher and Pharrell Williams.

And then the bottom fell out of the music-with-plastic-instruments genre. But both games returned to E3 this year, with new installments for the newest consoles.

No big concerts this year: "Guitar Hero Live" took up just a corner of Activision's booth, while Harmonix and Mad Catz set up a "Rock Band" stage on a walkway between the Convention Center's main showrooms.

"It's pretty indie at this point," Harmonix CEO Steve Janiak laughed. "But there's been a lot of interest. We've had lines of people queueing up in the sun all week to play."

Perhaps most important for the genre's future: "There's a whole new generation of fans finding out about it," Janiak said. "There's a lot of exuberance about our coming back."

Kanye West stormed into E3—and he didn't have to wait in any lines.

The rapper surprised several attendees when he slipped into the Los Angeles Convention Center on Wednesday to check out such games as "Uncharted 4: A Thief's End," "Halo 5: Guardians," "Cuphead" and "Star Wars: Battlefront." Patrick Bach, executive producer for the "Star Wars" multiplayer combat game, tweeted a photo with himself and the "Gold Digger" singer.

"He liked it," Bach said later in the Electronic Arts' suite. "I think. It was really quick."

A spokesman for the Entertainment Software Association, which organizes E3, says Yeezy was admitted to the trade show as a celebrity guest. His attendance wasn't totally unexpected. West's camp reached out to the ESA ahead of the expo to see if he could attend.

Josh Duhamel made E3 his own personal "Take your kid to work" outing. The actor brought his 21-month-old son Axl to the Activision booth to see the latest version of "Skylanders."

"It is unbelievable. Truly sensory overload," Duhamel said.

The actor, last seen in the TV series "Battle Creek," voices a character in "Skylanders Superchargers," which adds vehicles to the mix.

"I'm trying to teach him that this is dad. This is dad playing High Volt," Duhamel said. "He's like: 'Naw, man. That's not you. ... You're not cool enough for that.' But for me . it's one of those things that you always sort

of wanted to do."

He said he hopes Axl "isn't permanently damaged by all of this overload. But I think he is going to be fine. He loves it. He's having the best time."

Video-game fan Rosario Dawson was also at the Activision booth, playing "Call of Duty: Black Ops III." She described the game, set in 2065, as "the future of war. ... It's drones, controllers. It's a whole other world. It's technology on a whole other level."

Dawson—seen most recently in Netflix's "Daredevil" series—said she just has to keep herself from getting too intense when playing games.

"I've had that moment. You're, like, tweaking at 4 o'clock in the morning," she said. "My brother is like: 'Go to sleep. You're going to give yourself a heart attack.'"

"Yeah, it's not a good way to go," Dawson reflected. "I mean, it kind of would be a funny way to go but maybe not the best way to go."

Across the street from the convention center is a Hooters. Behind that Hooters is a sort of Bizarro World E3, a parking lot where developers smoke, drink beer and show off some of the show's weirdest games.

Welcome to the world of Devolver Digital, which spokeswoman Stephanie Tinsley Fitzwilliam describes as a "renegade publishing label enabling and supporting independent game developers from around the world."

That's no joke. The Devolver lineup this year includes a Polish game set in Japan, a French game set in the U.S.S.R. and a Spanish game set in California. What do they have in common? They're all unapologetically gory and more than a little silly. (And then there's "Hatoful Boyfriend: Holiday Star," a bird dating simulator from Japan via England.)

The whole scene behind Hooters reminded me of the early days of video games, when publishers exhibiting at the Consumer Electronics Show got sequestered with the porn producers. It's a gas to see up-and-coming game developers paying tribute to the occasionally unwholesome roots of the industry.

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