

The making of surprise hit Hi-Fi Rush

Hi-Fi Rush is a slick and stylish action game – but it's *also* a game about what it feels like to play music live. The rhythm hack-and-slash title from developer Tango Gameworks is rooted in John Johanas' own history with music. The game's director was the guitarist in a band with friends in high school, playing Radiohead covers as a self-taught group. His experience onstage during the school's battle of the bands as well as a few one-off shows later is one he remembers fondly.

"A lot of this game is influenced by the feeling of nailing it with other people playing in a band," Johanas says. "Obviously, it's single-player, but there's this weird visceral feeling that's extremely hard to describe: that reaction of a couple of people sticking together and playing something to the rhythm, and it hits and it lands perfectly. That feeling itself was kind of the initial inspiration for what I wanted to get across in this title."

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It was a short-lived period, as the group soon graduated from high school, but Johanas has been chasing that feeling in different ways since. As we talk over Zoom, I point out a guitar leaning against the wall in his living room. He mentions that he doesn't have as much free time to play nowadays as he would like, but he recently picked it up again after the busy months that led to the game's release. "I think I've forgotten everything I've ever learned," he laughs. "It's such a shame that I practiced so much and forgot everything. But I enjoy learning a song that I like and being able to play it myself. It's more of a hobby than anything."

Rhythm games have also been filling that gap over the years. While he and his high school friends loved *Rock Band* – choosing different instruments than the ones they played in real life – his favorite has always been *Guitar Hero Live*. He felt that this particular entry in the series was the one that made it feel like you were actually playing the instrument and was particularly upset when Activision announced it was being shut down back in 2018. At the same time, it was also a key factor in the making of *Hi-Fi Rush*.

“Actually, under my desk at work, I still have that *Guitar Hero* controller,” he says. “I brought it to the office to show people. We would look at that to understand how rhythm games worked in general, how they calculated whether or not you hit or didn’t hit the note, and things like that.”

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Aside from the rhythm elements, another goal was to present a throwback-type game. Johanas kept seeing the trend of games chasing modern technology and how the goal seems to be as close to real life as possible in terms of presentation. *Hi-Fi Rush*, on the other hand, almost feels like a Dreamcast title – and that was deliberate, as was moving away from the darker tone of past works from Tango Gameworks itself, such as *The Evil Within* or *Ghostwire: Tokyo*.

“I wanted, almost as a teaching lesson for myself as well as something that I felt people were instinctively craving, to go back to the basics of a game that is just fun to play and wasn’t positioned as story-first or anything like that,” he

tells me. “Sometimes you just want something that is almost pure fun and unpretentious. We’re not trying to be anything more than a feel-good experience.”

Quite a lot in *Hi-Fi Rush* feels like a throwback. The game is riddled with pop culture references, much like *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World*, *JoJo’s Bizarre Adventure*, and *Twin Peaks*. The soundtrack – a mix of original tracks, remixes, and licensed tracks – also exemplifies this, with artists including Nine Inch Nails, Zwan, and The Black Keys, to name a few.

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Johanas spent a long time iterating on a setlist that would fit the game properly, both in tone and in the mechanical sense. While he argues that some of the songs included still feel new to him, such as “Invaders Must Die” by The Prodigy, he thought that there would be a request to include tracks from the last few years. Yet the point he always brought up is that this is not a game about licensed music. The tracks are meant to pay tribute to the game’s vibe and the artists of that time, exposing them to new audiences – which is how he discovered “Whirring” from The Joy Formidable while playing *Guitar Hero Live*.

“I have my own picks of favorite songs of all time,” he tells me. “The problem is that when we were making a game, even if I love the song I want to put in, I wouldn’t sacrifice that for it working in the game.” The team figured out that the game would essentially run between 130 to 160 beats per minute (BPM), so Johanas had to go through the potential list and see which ones technically worked. The ones that didn’t, however, served as references for the original tracks, so the curation was fruitful.

That thorough iteration process extended to how the game looks. *Into The Spider-Verse* was a particular inspiration,

pushing the art team to learn techniques and visual style; no one had previous experience with cel shading or animations that involved stretching, for example.

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Gameworks

At its core, *Hi-Fi Rush* centers its story and characters around Chai. Johanas goes back to the idea of music, talking about the people who spend years trying to “make it” in that industry. Eventually, some of them face reality while others spend years chasing it until they’re able to do it. Chai fits into the category of someone who hasn’t faced reality yet, and he’s going out to do so. Nothing he does is mean-spirited, but it just comes from overconfidence – hence why the team focused on having the characters around him put Chai in his place, saying that, to be a rockstar, he needs to prove himself. That sentiment can be applied in different circumstances.

“If I want to use a game developer, for example, anyone can have a good idea and feel like they have the best idea for a game ever,” he says. “But you have to put in the work to actually make it real, and that’s a lot of work. Chai is the type of person who doesn’t want to put in the work, and he’s just looking for an easy way in. He’s kind of lucky in a lot of situations throughout the game, but he does realize that it’s less about him being cool and more about what it takes.”

Hi-Fi Rush may have seemed like a big departure from outside the studio, but for Johanas, it all ties back to those dreams of being a rockstar.

“Radiohead is probably my favorite band of all time,” he says.

“They changed my perspective on what you can do with music or how you can transform your image over time. That was almost weirdly inspiring for how we made this game. I would listen to *Kid A* from them going to work because it always reminded me that you can pivot art, and as long as you’re super confident and super proud and make something that you think is good, it will find its audience.”

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