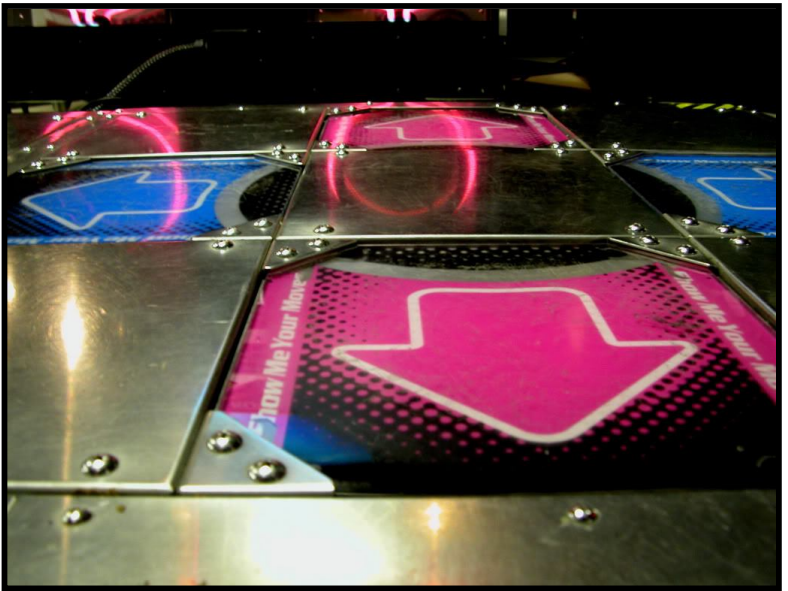


# Counting Combos

A History of the Japanese DDR Community  
~ An Insider's Perspective ~



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# Introduction

DDR, or “Dance Dance Revolution” as it is known in full, is a long running series of music games by Konami Corporation as part of the Bemani music game series. DDR started in the late 1990s and unlike most other games found in a typical Japanese arcade, it requires a more physical method of input. Players use their feet to move around a stage corresponding to a displayed step pattern all in sync with music. Some players have lost significant amounts of weight because of it, as has occasionally been noted in North American and other overseas media over the years. Others have been so inclined as to get exercise through this medium more so than a traditional activity such as jogging or swimming.

So why is there a whole book devoted to the community of players surrounding this game series in Japan? For one, the arcade scene in the West has long since dwindled and very few “arcades” in that sense of the word exist anymore. In contrast, arcades still exist and even thrive in Japan. As such, I feel that using the Japanese arcade scene as a backdrop can provide a lively setting to dive into the details of a game series and the community that follows it, including player reactions to the game series and

related behaviors and opinions over time.

A comparison of the opinions and social aspects of the game between the Eastern and Western communities is possible due to online forums and other social networking sites on the Internet in addition to occasional international meet-ups. Although this work is not intended to be an “East vs. West” comparative piece, some events on both sides may have influenced the other at times, and the differences in opinion are worthy of note. After more than a decade, there have been some very interesting trends, mindsets and stories to tell.

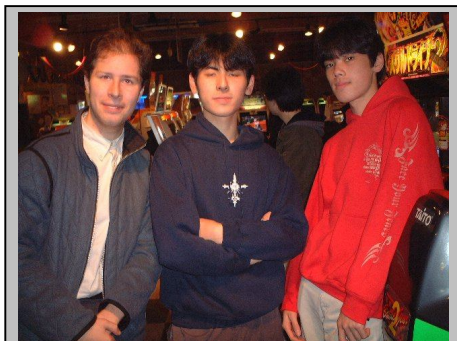
There have been other books and works that cover Japanese arcades and the scene that lives on to this day, of course. I have even had bit parts in the making of some of these books and films, but although I had always been associated with the rhythm game genre and did get to share a few of my observations and opinions, I always felt there was a lot more to say than I would be permitted to use in other works. Thus, I decided to take it upon myself to flush out more of the details of this game series and community and get it out to the world in the hopes some people may find this work as interesting or maybe even as fascinating as I had found it myself.

## About the Author



I first came to Japan in 1998 (at the tail end of the Nagano Olympics) for an internship. This was before the first mix of DDR was to be released, though I quickly took to the game when it was released and I was hooked on the series right up to the present day.

Over the years, I became friends with many of the local DDR players as well as acted as



Left to Right: Myself, Yasu, Take

a kind of conduit between the Japanese and overseas communities at times, and that put me in a unique position between them.

For better or worse, I am also responsible as a catalyst for starting the trend of taking a photo or video of a DDR score/result as a means of personal record as well as proof. Due to the close proximity of a few expert players near to where I lived and played, I was also able to use photo and video media to

show the (at the time) high level play of players like Yasu and his brother Take. Although the responses overseas were mixed and varied, I ended up being associated with their recognition both local to Japan as well as overseas, though I also unfortunately ended up living in their shadow as a DDR player.

I also shared information on the DDR series, accomplishments and players that I discovered, figured out, or translated such as the complete scoring system calculation method, isolated media like the recording of the original Pop'n Music Freestyle Videos and finding the hidden song "Max Period" in the home version of DDR Extreme two days before the official release, but I was never really known for any of these obscure actions.

My DDR experiences and ramblings were catalogued online as early as 1999, though I didn't include a proper forum interface until a few years after that. (I was using a Usenet newsgroup in the beginning) Players over the years came and went, but I was always in contact with the local players and I regularly reached out overseas to witness the changes in attitude and players as well as changes with the music game genre as a whole.

I also chose to write this book because I felt many of the more recent fans of the series had such radically different stances and opinions compared to the earlier Japanese community, and it might be interesting (or even useful) to understand how those differences came about and how the communities progressed and changed from what they were to what they are now. Occasionally, I even find some modern DDR fans just beginning to venture into the series mirroring the same opinions and attitudes as the Japanese players from over a decade prior.

Please understand that I am not any kind of great writer and although I did what I could to make this work presentable with proper spelling and grammar, I owe a great thanks to the many talented individuals that helped me to see this project through to completion for their numerous proofreads, critiques and suggestions.

*Aaron  
Chinellone*



# 1998



## Use your feet to play this game

From the Arcade Machine Expo earlier in the year, fans of the Konami's first arcade music game, Beatmania, were describing DDR as "Beatmania for your feet". There was not much else to say at that time other than DDR was another entry in the newly formed "Bemani" series of music games by Konami (The title "Bemani" being a contraction of "Beatmania"), but the crowds were huge when the test location versions started hitting arcades.

Although the official release date of DDR was in November, quite a few arcades had their machines before that date. In fact, I was playing it by the end of October and a long time friend of mine had been playing since September. The original version did come out in September, but the definitive "1.5" version, or "Internet Ranking Version", that added 2 more songs ("Make It Better" and "Trip Machine" for those interested) was officially released on November 21, 1998. So when Konami celebrates the birthday of DDR, they are actually celebrating the birthday of the "1.5" mix (version), which contained everything from the test location and original release

versions except for one song.

Interestingly enough, neither the 1st mix nor the 1.5 mix had a song found in the test location version, "Money". The last time "Money" (a song that sounded a bit too much like another song in the game "Make it Better") was used was in the final test location versions of the game before the September release. Similarly, (but for other reasons) the songs "Jump" and "Can't Take My Eyes Off You" were cut from the final releases of DDR 2nd and 3rd mixes respectively at the test location phase. Although the act of removing songs from the final release turned out to be nothing exceptionally rare, there always seemed to be some speculation within the community about why, and completionists (surprisingly more common in the East than the West, but there will be more on that later) bemoaned the fact that those songs remained unplayable on any subsequent arcade version.

Along with the release of the first game in the Pop'n Music series in September as well as the then-popular Beatmania, the music game craze took hold as DDR quickly became a runaway hit despite the very short song list. The song "Butterfly" was by far the most overplayed song on it and became

synonymous with the game itself to the casual passerby, much to the delight of the artists, ("Smile .dk") I'm sure.

The lines to play were long and machines were absolutely everywhere, even in places that shouldn't normally have had arcade machines (Laundromats? Really?) As a consequence, arcade owners were raking in profits on this game, especially when some places, even in the rural regions, were charging ridiculous



DDR 1st Mix Test Location  
Version, where it all began  
(Ikebukuro St. Tropez, 1998)

prices like 200 yen for 2 songs (or 1 song on double). Granted, some locations had their machines outside of the store or arcade (something you wouldn't see overseas, I bet), and one infamous tournament in Osaka (The Konami-run Circo Porto arcade) at the end of the year hosted an entire tournament outside of the arcade. At the climax of this tournament, Konami estimated that from their gallery photos and on-site staffs there were no fewer than 250 people watching at any one time.

Also, before the time the 2nd mix of DDR was released, passing the boss song "Paranoia" on Maniac mode was considered a status symbol among gamers. This was very reminiscent of how gamers in the early/mid 80s viewed someone finishing the arcade game "Dragon's Lair". In retrospect however, a new player to DDR may not find Paranoia as difficult as it was viewed back then, especially in comparison to the newer charts found in later mixes of the game. Still, players at the time all had flat feet (so to speak) so changing the rhythm or pattern to anything other than one that was simple and straightforward tended to trip up the average player.

In terms of play styles, there were two distinctive ones that emerged from the test location days. One was noted at the Kanto (Tokyo region) event and the other in Kansai (Kyoto/Osaka region). The "Kanto" step method involved the player stepping on the Left arrow with their left foot and the Up, Right, Down arrows with their right foot. In contrast, the Kansai step involved the player stepping on an arrow but then quickly shifting their body to return to the middle of the stage.

There was another option for play called "Double" mode in which a player could play charts that utilized

all 8 panels of the stage. Seeing someone playing this mode was not nearly as common, though not unheard of, either. In either case, crowds occasionally did gather to see someone attempt this mode, especially if they were proficient.

There were big fans of the game, but even though there were a few tournaments, there weren't real DDR "groups" at the time. There were fan groups for specific arcades (the "home" crowd) that also liked this new DDR game, however. Konami did have a social site for DDR fans at the time, though it was very

minimal and nothing compared to the other fan sites and even Konami's own now-defunct DDROnline that emerged up as years went by.



Already getting ready for the second iteration in the series

# 1999



**'Cause when we dance together~**

1999 was a busy year. Just as gamers thought DDR was a one time novelty game, the 2nd mix was released at the end of January, riding on the mass popularity of the game. Additionally, other music games such as Guitar Freaks and DrumMania were also released and helped propel the music game genre. DDR 3rd mix also came out this year to propel the phenomenon even further with double the song count of the previous mix. The first entry in the Beatmania IIDX series was also released and drew



its own dedicated crowd as well. The transition from 5 key (Beatmania) to 7 key (Beatmania IIDX) blew many player's minds, though.

Due in part to Konami using licensed music from the Dancemania series, the entire Techno/Dance/Eurobeat genres were thriving in popularity among

music gamers and the influence was also felt throughout the public. Club Velfarre in Roppongi was at its popularity peak around this time, and the "Para Para" dance craze was at its height, too.

However, this is also when over saturation of the DDR series with its many offshoots took hold. In addition to the main series, there was DDR 2nd mix Club Mix (club songs from the Beatmania series), DDR 2nd mix "Substream", which linked directly with Beatmania IIDX for dual play, the DDR



Solo Bass and SOLO 2000 games (6 panel variant, though 3 and 4 panel modes were available as well), and specialized mixes catering to specific musical artists with "Dancing Stage featuring True Kiss Destination" and "Dancing Stage featuring Dreams Come True"

On a side note, the SOLO series was an interesting

phenomenon in the sense that 6-panel (and 3-panel on beginner mode) was something different from the norm for the series up to that point. However, despite the introduction of diagonal arrows to compliment the 4 cardinal directions, it was only ever really seen as a novelty for the time. In that sense, the arrows were a little bit harder to read, but the largest problem was that since DDR was a social platform at this time, (and the SOLO series was 1-player only) limiting the number of players to 1 was an arguably anti-social move by Konami (as perceived by its fans). True, the SOLO mixes did take up less space in the arcade and arcade owners could cram more of them into a small space, but while DDR was seen as inviting to the players (come, join in!), the SOLO mixes were viewed as an isolationist's mix. The series did see some traffic during the heyday, but ultimately it died out in favor of the main series on the classic machine design.

What also thrived during this time was the player community. There were DDR "teams", usually of around half a dozen to a dozen (sometimes more) players that would get together for semi-regular arcade sessions and a gathering afterwards such as a dinner outing or event.



The DDR teams were just as much a social gathering platform as they were a group of friends that liked to play games. Skill was not really a determinant at this time for admission into these teams, and most of the time they were simply based on location or arcade. There were dedicated scorer and performance groups, but they were in the minority.

Even so, most groups had some list of rules to abide by before a newcomer could be admitted. For example, take "Team CPC" (Club Pink Cocktail) from Kagoshima, which had the following 4 rules before one could be admitted:

1. Must be a fan and reader of the magazine "Fantasy Cocktail" (a cocktail/recipe/fan magazine)
2. Must enjoy Dance Dance Revolution and want to improve
3. Must not be a disturbance to others
4. Must be able to clear "Have You Never Been Mellow" (Normal difficulty) without outside assistance

These teams were known to be flamboyant in their performances. Although during the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> mixes of the series the public did find this amusing and

even enough so as to call it a spectacle, the widespread reach and popularity of the groups and their subsequent performances eventually started to wear thin with the average passer-by. However, within the teams themselves, everyone was having a great time, like a party that could never end.

The home version of DDR for the PlayStation console came out this year as well, but even though it sold moderately well, it was clear that this phenomenon was more for the arcade experience than at home. Part of the reason for this apart from the social aspect was that the soft pads available for the home version could not replicate the same experience as the arcade could provide, despite the actual game content being fairly close to the source material.

The home version did introduce one amusing gameplay twist, however: The introduction of the "Ouch!" judgment in a special "Arrange" Mode of the game. In this mode, players were punished by a reduced life bar for stepping where there were no arrows. It was possible to fail a stage by stepping too many times where there were no arrows.

One other version that was released near the end of 1999 was the DAM-DDR Karaoke mix. This was a system based off the "DAM-G128" Karaoke system used in Japan. In addition to also providing music for singing, it would output randomly generated steps for a special DDR stage. The charts generated could be of "Soft" "Basic" or "Another" difficulty (players noted that at the "Another" difficulty, it was noticeably hard to actually carry a tune at the same time). At the end of the song, the player/singer was graded not only on dancing ability (directly related to score) but also singing ability. It also featured a calorie counter to show just how much the player/singer had burned per song.

One downside to this was that although people paid for the karaoke service and room on an hourly or half-hour basis, the DAM-DDR system was an additional 200 yen per play at the time (or in some

cases even more expensive, being priced at however much the karaoke plaza felt like charging), making it



extremely expensive for anyone that might have wanted to take it seriously. There was a "2<sup>nd</sup>" mix of this system that increased the song count to 20,000, however. Although now extremely rare, some machines do exist to date at a few of the "Big Echo" karaoke plazas.

Lastly, Konami held their (arguably) largest public DDR tournament at the end of the year, known as the "Dance Dance Revolution King of Freestyle Dancers" event. The machine used was a modified 2nd mix machine stripped down to 4 songs, each used in a different stage of the tournament.

This was a major tournament with sponsors including Toshiba Emi, Intercord Japan, Japan Airlines, Japan Travel Bureau, Pioneer and Puma to promote



The earliest and possibly most sponsored DDR tournament (King of Freestyle Dancers, 1999)

awareness of DDR. The winners received round trip tickets to Okinawa and various autographed memorabilia. The musical artist "Captain Jack" (one

of the many musical artists associated with the Bemani series over the years) also made a public appearance at this event and announced (and demoed) some of his upcoming music in the next release of DDR

# 2000



## Burnin' the Floor

As the year started off on a high note, Konami released a few other music games around this time, including Dance Maniax, Para Para Paradise and Keyboard Mania. There was such a wide variety of music games that players were finding themselves absorbed in these games for entire days, weekends and holidays at a time. Many of the music gamers from this era still refer to this time as the "golden era" of music games.

The best part for gamers was that there were many arcades that had a good number of different music games. Konami's own Circo Porto arcades had pretty much all of them, with multiple machines as well. (Barring earlier versions)



Konami still partying like it is 2000.  
(2000 Konami presentation on their  
lineup of music games for the year)

During the course of the year, Konami released the DDR 3rd+, 4th and 4th+ mixes. These “plus” mixes were primarily additional song packs and a few game mode tweaks to the core game, intended to extend the life span of the game.

One interesting point to note is that 3rd+ introduced a number of Korean songs (7 in total) into the mix from the Asian mix “DDR 3<sup>rd</sup> Mix Korean Version” which was originally based upon DDR 3<sup>rd</sup> Mix. (Confused yet?) This was believed to be partly due to the Japan/Korea friendship event going on that year. Also of note, the mixes known as “DDR 3<sup>rd</sup> Mix Korean Version” and “DDR 3<sup>rd</sup> Mix Ver. Korea 2” were actually Asian mixes for outside of Japan; these mixes could not be found in a Japanese arcade.

Also this year, DDR 4<sup>th</sup> mix was the first to do away with the classic song selection interface (the CD selection wheel) in favor of song title banners used to indicate and help



select songs. The available songs were further broken

up into "categories" from which the players could choose when they first started their game. In theory this was nice, but in practice it limited the player to picking songs from one category per game. This was rectified with an "All Music" option in the later 4th+ mix as well as the home version.

Although 4<sup>th</sup>+ was released not too long after 4<sup>th</sup> mix, one additional and noticeable change was the inclusion of some notably harder step charts for some of the older songs. In retrospect it might have been an attempt to raise the difficulty bar in the game but even though it was a thrill to see someone play and clear these charts, these charts were seen as a bit too intimidating for some players and these charts didn't get nearly as much play time as other charts and songs in the game. Perhaps it was just too soon for that kind of a jump in difficulty.

Also during this time, the whole Para Para dancing craze started to fade out from mainstream popularity. (Though the scene itself continued on for another couple of years) This left the "Para Para Paradise" series in a bit of an awkward position, and although this didn't affect DDR players and fans directly, the fading in popularity of Para Para also influenced the fading in popularity of Eurobeat and Dance/Techno



music from the mainstream focus, although the Dancemania line of CDs (including the Dancemania BASS Mix series) still remained popular items for the time. This played an important role in later mixes of DDR and the Bemani music games in general.

The DDR groups and clubs marched their way into 2000 though slowly these same groups started to disband as "DDR Teams". This happened for a few reasons.

First, although Konami had a few sponsored events with earlier mixes that were a combination of skill and performance ability, the goals changed when their own tournaments and rankings went online to a purely score-based system. There were still local performance competitions at the time to a limited degree, but without any encouragement from the parent company or even arcades, many of these groups just became circles of friends, (which in a sense they always were) general gaming clubs or even general music game clubs.

Next, with the focus more towards score, this marked the initial rise of the "scorer". Up until this point, players for the most part didn't care so much about maximizing their score to the point of all Perfects

(some exceptions, of course) though each player's own personal goal was always to maximize his or her score as best he/she could do in a more general sense. (Passing a song, getting a letter grade of A, getting a full combo, etc.) Around this time various fan made scoring sites and online venues where scores and records could be discussed had emerged. This did drive the competitive spirit of the game in that sense, but for some of the "DDR Teams" that really only wanted to play for a good time and/or performance, they felt like they were getting squeezed out of the scene.

With the competitive spirit came inter-team tournaments (either in person or by means of posted scores on the internet BBSs of the time). This was usually limited to scorer teams, and those with no interest didn't have to participate, but again, not participating and seeing all of the buzz in the community focused on these scorers and their team battles made the more casual players and "performers" feel like they really didn't exist in "the scene".

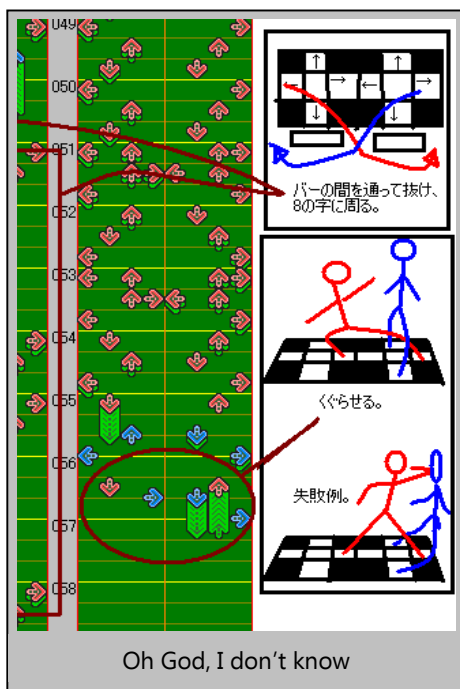
However, on the topic of tournaments a new type of tournament challenge emerged, and the inspiration for that came from the "Challenge Mode" in the

home versions of DDR 4<sup>th</sup> and Extra mixes. These challenges required completely different skills such as aiming for a specific mid-level score, to score more Greats than Perfects, to not get a combo higher than 3, etc. This inspiration resulted in new and alternate “challenge” tournaments or events that ran alongside a main score-based tournament. These challenge tournaments lived on to the present day.

Regarding online score sites, it is interesting to note that by and large, the scores posted were trusted and trustworthy; there weren't people lying about doing so great at the game they were decimating everyone else (which would have been out of character for any Japanese player at the time anyways). In the event of doubt, most teams were able to arrange a time/place to show off their skills. To finish the day, just like with the teams of 1999, they would all go out together for dinner/a drink/etc. afterwards. The camaraderie was still there, but mentality and focus of the players (and their teams) had changed. The general trustworthiness of the Japanese players continued to the present day, however. Even on fan-run scoring sites, questionable scores (by lesser known/unknown players) are called out in extreme cases and accounts made for the sole purpose of trying to pass off fake scores are deleted. This was mostly due to the tight

knit nature of the scoring "community", though.

Oddly, there was a small cult phenomenon around the time of DDR 4<sup>th</sup> mix. Before the home versions and soundtracks became publicly available (for purchase), it was not unheard of to find some players recording the music from the



machine, getting photos (or drawing up) step charts for the songs and then sharing them only among their local friends. They did not want this information getting out to just everyone since they felt it gave an unfair advantage to know about awkward rhythms and patterns beforehand as opposed to stomping away at them in the arcade, so there was a very confined sort of DDR media/step chart trading going on. This may seem all a bit silly in hindsight, but it is something worth pointing out since this mentality of

hoarding information came into play again not too many years later.

Around this time, arcade operators started to take notice of the mass overabundance of DDR machines. There were many offshoots and versions in the main series by now and they could see the over-saturation and how just having a machine didn't ensure it would be profitable or draw crowds anymore. Some arcade managers opted to try and make their arcade experience more attractive to gamers while others sent their machines back to the warehouse (more on this later)

From the player's perspective this wasn't necessarily a bad thing as arcades started cleaning up and remodeling / decorating their arcades to make a better play experience for the players (to try and attract more customers). Arcades that would prevail would often



Odaiba Tokyo Leisure Land offers perks like a full cafeteria, large arcade area and benches for the players.

have small luxuries like cheap drink vending machines or free drink services (i.e. small drink cup for every game played) or benches and couches to sit on between games, though sometimes it may have been the only arcade around the area anyways so it would survive regardless if anything was done to the arcade or not. These small luxuries still do exist today, though it can mostly be seen with other game series where the staff has installed headphone jacks or more comfortable chairs or section off areas around the games to minimize external distractions while playing.

One arcade chain in particular that thrived was Konami's own "Circo Porto". Although there were a few of these arcades spread out across Japan, arguably the most popular was the one in Shinjuku, which thrived despite being situated on the fringe of the then-infamous red light district of Kabukicho. The employees of the arcade were all



Konami's Circo Porto arcade in Shinjuku. 2 floors of Bemani music game and merchandise madness

indirectly Konami employees and as such occasionally ran official Konami-sponsored events including weekly score attack tournaments (small ones). They had multiple machines of each game series, including a then- stunning four DDR machines side by side. There was also a small section of the arcade devoted to the sale of Bemani/Konami merchandise as well, though the goods tended to be overpriced and not the main focus of the arcade anyway. In the eyes of the music game fans at the time, Konami could do no wrong.



Shinjuku Circo Porto had 4 DDR machines, which was unheard of for arcades at the time.

Back to the point I made earlier about machines shipped back to the warehouse, this was sad news for many of the local players. However, this also proved to be good for the overseas market, as even though these warehouses weren't usually legally allowed to directly ship the machines overseas due to copyright and distribution laws, they sometimes sold them to

other 3rd party distributors that would then go on to ship overseas. So what does that make all of the machines in America and Europe? All bootleg, though in retrospect Konami obviously wasn't that keen on trying to hunt them all down. Actually, the proliferation of machines in this way may have helped Konami penetrate the North American and European markets.

Finally, to get back to the point about the fading of Eurobeat/Dance/Techno music from the mainstream, there was something Konami inadvertently did that changed the type of music used in future music game releases. Although it is still unclear whether or not Konami execs could see that the Dancemania craze wouldn't last forever and they needed to move in a new direction eventually (or that Avex Trax was charging a small fortune to license music from them), during the height of DDR 4th mix's popularity, Konami decided to hold two separate music audition contests. One audition was for an artist/group that would receive a contract to help produce and perform music for the upcoming DDR 5th mix (and possibly other DDR mixes or Konami music games if successful), and the other was a composer contest for which the winning work would also appear in DDR 5th mix.



The winner of the performance contest was the group known as BeForU (actually, all were individual winners that were later formed into a group by Konami) who went on to perform the song "Dive" for DDR 5th mix (and a few other songs in later mixes), produce a number of songs for many of the other music game series as well as their own material. The winner of the composer contest was Ken Matsumoto (known as the DDR player "STM" to the locals), whom teamed up with the Konami in-house music composer Naoki Maeda to produce the next song in the "Paranoia" series of songs, "Paranoia Eternal". As a side note, this song was also jokingly known as Paranoia Yojo, (Yojo = little girl) originating from an in-joke by his friends.

This laid the framework to encourage and attract other independent artists to produce original works for the various music game series, though this came at the price of fewer licenses, particularly licensed music from the Dancemania series. Although licensed music from other labels was used in subsequent games, there was always a sense of nostalgia for the music from the Dancemania series of albums. Despite the fact the Dancemania tunes were mostly remixes, the remixes were of popular tunes that even casual players or passer-bys could

identify. In later years, the Namco series "Taiko no Tatsujin" exploited this mentality by constantly updating their mixes with the latest popular tunes. That series still lives on over a decade later.

# 2001



## Let's MAX!

2001 was viewed as the last year of the "golden age" for DDR and music game players. Circo Porto in Shinjuku was still keeping gamers happy, though the DDR teams of only a couple years prior were no longer the same types of teams that existed in 1999. However, there was still camaraderie among the fans as many arcades left out notebooks for public use near the music games. This was kind of a pen and paper BBS, but it was something that did help bind the gamers together at their arcade (or across arcades).

DDR 5th mix was released this year without much fanfare, though it was a well enjoyed mix by all. Around this time the shift from performance to score-based play really became obvious, but there is more on that later in this Chapter. Another new



The game may not have had much fanfare,  
but the Internet Ranking prizes were nice

addition to this mix was the introduction of long version songs. These songs were worth the same as two songs from a player perspective but were also twice as long. In other words, the player could choose to play 3 normal songs or 1 normal song and 1 "Long version" song. Reactions to this were mostly neutral. It was mildly impressive to the locals if someone could achieve a full combo on a long version song (even if only because it was longer and gave the largest combos) though players weren't lining up specifically to play them, as they chose rather to play two different songs than one longer one.

Players were getting better at the game and the once-mythical AAA (all Perfects) on a song was a reality for a few, even on the hardest (Maniac) difficulty. This tied in with other factors to create all kinds of drama and conflict later, for better or worse.

*This is the point where I introduce my role in this community, trying to stay as objective and non-biased as I can as it pertains to the history of the Japanese DDR community. Being a catalyst for certain events puts me in an odd position, though.*

Around this time, I was curious to see if the DDR series was even known overseas. The local Japanese blogs and related web sites were all Japanese-only and there was no notice at all of any kind of activity or contact outside Japan. To my surprise I discovered there was a US Northwest (Seattle based) community, and they later introduced me to Southern California and Texas based communities. At the time, scoring really well (to the point of an AAA) was unheard-of. Just claiming that you achieved one would have people automatically brand you a liar and/or you could expect several responses of a sarcastic nature mocking the accomplishment and the very notion you could achieve it.

Around this time I received a request from someone named Chris Foy (whom some may well know along with Kyle Ward for their work on the "In The Groove", "iDance" and "ReRave" game series) for any footage or photos of these "crazy" AAAs. Fortunately for me, not only did I have a digital camera, I had recently moved to Kanagawa prefecture and was within reasonable distance of the arcade known as "Muthos" where there were already several players that could pull off these AAAs. On the day I went to ask if people could try to score an AAA on something so I could take a photo, everyone was happy to

oblige, though the three people I ended up getting on photo were "Akudaikan", a very young "Yasu" and myself.

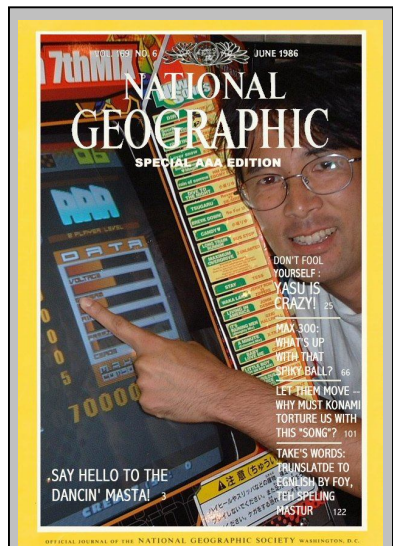
One important detail about the photos was the time at which they were taken. Although the player's best score on a song was shown at the song selection screen, the score shown was the one stored on the player's memory card file, a file that (with some 3<sup>rd</sup> party devices such as the DexDrive) could potentially be opened and changed on the player's PC to be whatever the player wanted. Granted, the process wasn't quite as simple as changing a simple number since the score data was encoded in reverse hexadecimal, but it still wasn't out of the realm of possibility to have it changed. For this reason, even though the window was only a matter of seconds and some photos were bound to be blurry or off-center, a photo at the results screen was best. The actual arcade machines could not be hacked or modified in the same way as a memory card file and hence this method became the preferred way of taking photos to record scores for personal record and proof.

Years later, videos became an even better record, though at this time video recording was not only

frowned upon by the arcade staff, it was cumbersome to manage via PC and upload to the internet (note that YouTube did not exist at this time; videos had to be hosted elsewhere). This media proved to be highly entertaining among fans of the series in Japan and abroad, especially since the idea was so novel at the time.

In general, photos were usually sufficient “proof” though once in a while a cry from someone that an accomplishment may have been digitally altered (something not done anyways except for occasional humor, and in those cases the forgery was plainly obvious) could usually be silenced with a video.

Posting these photos on the internet was the equivalent to a bomb going off, not just for the intended audience, but for the local Japanese players and teams who also knew of the



We took so many photos over the years they might as well have released this edition.

photos existence. (Due to friends such as Akudaikan and Yasu telling them in my case) Up until that point, gamers weren't normally taking photos of their scores. After all, it was seen as a ridiculously needless thing to do from a personal perspective since the player's scores could be saved on their memory card. Furthermore, most players and fans of the series had only heard of these AAAs up until that point in time but had never actually seen a live one.

Not only overseas, but even locally where there were players at this skill level, people were crying "fake" at these accomplishments by their own fellow Japanese players, even on the simplest of songs. Some even tried to use mathematical "proof" in the form of Poisson distribution to show that the odds of getting an AAA were so low it wasn't feasible. Fortunately there were a handful of players capable of doing this and a few quick tours around Tokyo silenced many of the naysayers. This resulted in a cyclic pattern for scores and proof in the order:

1. Player claims AAA on song (posts photo)
2. Others cry "fake"
3. AAA is demonstrated in person
4. Repeat from step 1 with more difficult song



This all died down over the course of a few months, (with the exception of the hardest of songs at the time, more on that later) but the mindset about how good someone could be at the game was shaken, and the "fun" factor from the old days was gradually being replaced with raw skill at the game, regardless of whether or not the players enjoyed the music or steps. Scoring well became the new focus.



As a consequence of the naysayers, name calling, and people crying "Fake!" at everything by overseas fans of the series, a large number of Japanese players were completely put off the foreign DDR/music game communities. Although these same Japanese players sometimes took indirect cheap shots at each other online (e.g. "I finally got a 15 great full combo on Tribal Dance!" "My 10 greats say Hello"), the directness of insults and "trolling" as the Japanese perceived it overseas was seen as far too hostile and untactful (or downright hurtful in some cases) and they would have nothing to do with it. In reality not

all of the criticism was hostile, and the number of blatant insults and ad-hominem attacks were not so great (though they did stick out the most), but the sarcasm did not convey well on the internet, and even less so since there was a language barrier involved. To be fair, sarcasm isn't a trait of the (stereo)-typical Japanese anyway.

There were a few Japanese that braved the world of foreign DDR and music game communities, but they were few and far between. However, after all that was said and done, as years went by players did try to pay a passing glance at what was going on, especially related to foreign-only mixes, other music games, and (some) related accomplishments. In general though, the end result was that there were a few key people that tried to act as a news conduit from the foreign gamer sites to a more familiar Japanese blog/BBS environment to try and filter out what made some users uncomfortable about communicating directly with the West.

Also, as an unfortunate consequence, people that made sarcastic or insulting remarks to the Japanese communities or players themselves tended to get ignored completely, and in the case of any accomplishments they were all disregarded, (except

for those caught on photo or video) partly influenced by the fact mentioned earlier that in the initial ventures into the foreign music gaming communities, questions or accomplishments were met by sarcastic and/or snarky replies and they had no idea what to take seriously so they just decided to "screw it" and phased it all out.

This phenomenon was not limited to DDR, though.

Final Fantasy 11

Online saw

something similar

when the

Japanese, whom

had been playing

for a while before

the American

players got the

game, went online together with their fellow

Americans. The Japanese gamers had their own way

of playing and the directness and bluntness of the

American players ("Gimme weapons!" "Gimme

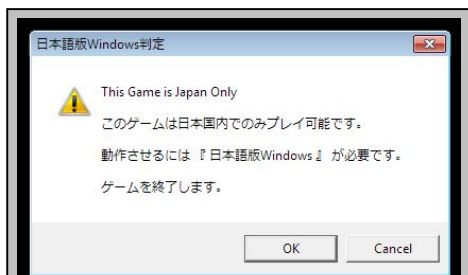
money!") got to be so annoying and harassing that

they set up "Japanese Only" groups and clans. This

also happened so frequently that it became

something of a meme in Japan. However, the reason

wasn't because they didn't want to play with the



Sorry, your computer isn't Japanese  
enough for this game

American gamers; it was because the contact between them really got off on the wrong foot and the mentality/way of doing things rubbed them the wrong way. Hence, there was always an initial wall of hesitation and potential misunderstanding to overcome before playing with them online.

Back to DDR, one final note on this topic that came to light was that Japanese players thought nothing of playing the same song again and again to get their high scores / AAA rank. Although this was frowned upon overseas in general, it was a small difference in play style that also fueled some of the fire over debates about accomplishments, particularly since DDR 5th mix did not award certain score bonuses if the player played the same song more than once in the same game.



If at first you don't succeed...

To the Japanese players though, the AAA was far more important to them than the number at the bottom of the results screen.

Around this time it was also apparent that Konami was oblivious to the skill of the better players (or

blissfully ignorant). One particular weekend, there was a beginner (light) mode tournament in progress on one of the 4 DDR machines at Circo Porto. The winner of that weekly tournament scored 3 greats (with the rest "Perfect") on a simple song on basic difficulty ("My Generation"). During the congratulations speech by the Konami staff, a friend of mine (Yasu) played a far more difficult song (Afronova Primeval) on Maniac mode and also got 3 greats (3 greats off a perfect AAA rank) on the neighboring machine.

While the other players were looking and pointing at the score with stunned expressions, the staff (whom specifically looked at the result as well as heard the gasps from the audience) shrugged along while grunting "Whatever" (betsu ni) and went on to exclaim how that 3 greats on My Generation Basic made the winner one of the most impressive players in a long time. (Note that although the winner was determined by machine score, I remember the number of greats since 1 digit is easier to remember than an arbitrary 6 or 7 digit number).

Granted, in some cases, the letter grade determined the winner over score. This was blatantly unfair in some cases, (A full combo was overvalued such that a full combo of "greats" outranked a score of all "Perfects" minus one good/boo/miss



since either of a "Perfect" or "Great" judgment would continue the combo) but at least this came to light with Konami during this mix and the way the letter grade was calculated did change with the next mix of DDR.

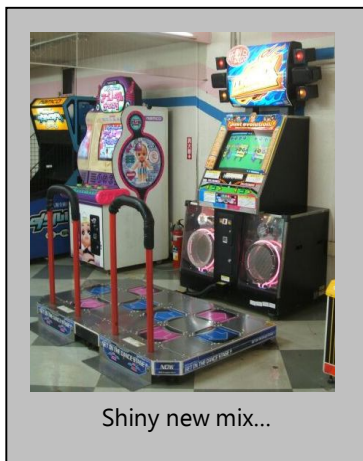
The next big excitement for the DDR players of this time was the upcoming release of the next game in the series, DDR MAX. Note that by this time the fans of the series tended to be more serious gamers that played for score as opposed to casual gamers that just played for fun.

The test location machine in the Ikebukuro St. Tropez arcade drew huge lines to play. There were a lot of changes made to the core mechanics and the user options/interface with which gamers could tinker.

Speed modifiers, freeze arrows and more difficult charts overall made for a pretty exciting event for the players of the time. Most of the soundtrack consisted of Trance and more mellow music in comparison to the hard beats of previous mixes, but that was the music trend at the time, and for what it is worth DDR MAX alone managed to get more than a few players to pick up the trance CD that made up part of the soundtrack, "Fantasia: The Best of World Trance"



With this new mix, there was a new type of arrow called the "freeze" arrow which required players to step and hold the arrows for a specific duration. Even though this was in another music game played abroad, to the Japanese, this was new and exciting. Players got used to it quickly, though it did trip up players at the test location version.



One big change that came in the song selection screen was the absence of the "Foot rating" system in favor of the "Groove radar". Although future mixes incorporated this system as well as the traditional foot ratings, this was the only mix to not have foot ratings at all. This gave a more precise preview of what kind of patterns were used in the song. However, by this point the players had the foot ratings so firmly engrained in their minds that doing without felt like something was missing and this system alone did not prove to be that popular. These foot ratings were restored in the next mix, though. The five categories used in the graph (and their meanings) are:



- Stream** – Overall density of steps in the step chart
- Voltage** – The peak density of steps in the chart
- Air** – Number of “jump” steps in the step chart
- Freeze** – Number of freeze arrows in the step chart
- Chaos** – Number of steps that do not fall on a quarter beat

This was also the first time the "intimidation" factor was felt by some of the players. This didn't affect the more hardcore players all that much, but with the huge gap in difficulty



between standard and expert modes, some of the non-hardcore crowd became discouraged with the songs and their difficulty, intimidating and driving some players away from the game series altogether. Others withdrew themselves to playing “Light” and “Standard” modes only, despite there being a few easier "Heavy" charts available.

One other thing that started to happen was that the more "hardcore" players came more into contact with each other as if brought together by a common struggle. Not only through the internet, players occasionally traveled in groups across the country to meet up with other groups of players. There was the camaraderie of the teams from 3rd mix to a degree, but this time it was almost always related to playing only for score.

In the final release that soon followed, and even with the test location version, passing (or doing well on) the boss song "MAX 300" quickly became a status symbol among Japanese DDR players. This wasn't completely similar to how Paranoia was a general gaming cultural phenomenon during the first mixes, though the accomplishment did have a similar aura to fans of the series. At the time, scoring a letter grade of AA or better on this song was rewarded with a chance at the Encore Extra Stage, but that was a rare sight at the time. Anyone that could pass MAX 300 with an AA was viewed as a godly



player.

On a related note, one important change is how the letter grade was calculated at this point. The new method differed in that it was based on "dance points", or the ratio of the player's score to the maximum possible by assigning weighted values to Perfects/Greats, etc. In simpler terms, from this point on a full combo was not as critically important in determining the letter grade as it was with previous mixes provided the player could still score well overall even if they didn't have a full combo.

Even though this newest mix had many features that the players really loved (adjustable scroll speed modifiers, scroll direction, extra stage system, etc.), players were disappointed at the relatively small number of songs in the game compared to the number in 4th+ or even 5th mix. Even so, this mix remained a significant and memorable mix for its time.

Later in the year, the test location version of DDR MAX 2 was released in Ikebukuro (again). This was an odd time because people were freely allowed to take pictures and jot notes down about the new mix despite the fact a representative from Konami was

right there the whole time and even allowed himself to be in photos. Although this was a tremendous help in getting news about this mix out across the globe, Konami decided to tighten security from this point on and such openness wasn't seen again at future test locations.

Finally, to close out the year, the Circo Porto arcade in Shinjuku shut down operations. There was quite a bit of traffic going through the arcade right up to the end, but nothing near the heyday only a year ago. However, music game fans had other arcades they could



frequent that were closer to where they lived and also cheaper in many cases (Circo Porto was charging 200 yen a game for many of their titles).

This arcade chain was pivotal prior to that point, and although it is still unclear whether or not gamers were more content sticking to their local arcades,

Konami decided that their arcade division "project" was a success, and although they did not choose to continue with their arcade operator division, they sold their division to the DAIEI national chain of supermarkets and shopping centers where a questionably disproportionate number of Konami and Bemani games can still be found to this day.

On this note, Konami eventually decided to close down the remaining "Circo Porto" arcade chain stores, though some remained open until 2002. Fortunately for gamers, there were many arcades around, even some just a block away from Circo Porto that also had most of the Bemani music game series as well as other titles.

# 2002



## You are my Destiny

As DDR players entered 2002, the scene was predominantly comprised of players known as "score attackers", or those that played with the specific goal of getting the



Forget DDR Performances, Pop'n Music Performances outside was "where it was at"

highest scores possible (that they could). Although there was still the occasional freestyle performer at certain venues, (mostly in crowded areas where the DDR machine was along a path where many could pass by) actually seeing someone like that was an increasingly rare event. However, the view of DDR as a source of regular exercise was still popular, especially since there was a minor fitness fad going on around this time.

Amusingly, Konami released another game to try and cash in on the fitness craze of the time with their "Martial Beat" title. This game wasn't so noteworthy



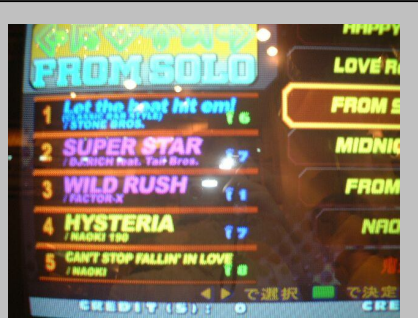
Martial Beat, an unplayable mess that made use of the same hardware found in DDR

except for the fact it made use of old DDR hardware and house a gigantic sensor array suspended over the player. Although the arcade game was a complete flop, the home versions were marketed as health/fitness packages, and those had marginal success on that front. The entire game soundtrack also made use of music found in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> iterations of the DDR series.

DDR MAX 2 was released in March of this year. This mix was eagerly awaited by many fans because of what was known from the test location version, including the base song list and introduction of challenge courses. Of the music, "Tsugaru" stood out for some reason, and in later years it was referred to by the local community as "That better version of

Matsuri Japan (from 5th mix)". (Matsuri Japan wasn't hated, but it did come across as very stereotypical Japanese traditional music that just happened to have a strong beat)

In addition, there were special remixes of some of the songs in the game that were only available in a new mode called "oni" (demon) mode, in which players started with a set number of "lives"



Oh right, don't mind the occasional error in song difficulty. That isn't a 1-footer, really

(represented by a battery) to complete a nonstop course containing a fixed set of songs. These oni courses were also used later for Internet Ranking purposes. The new remixed songs were popular, and it actually did drive players to become good enough to pass certain songs just to get to the remixes in which they were interested, especially since they were not available in normal play.

To a degree, this also continued to the present day, with some players picking an oni course (or a similar



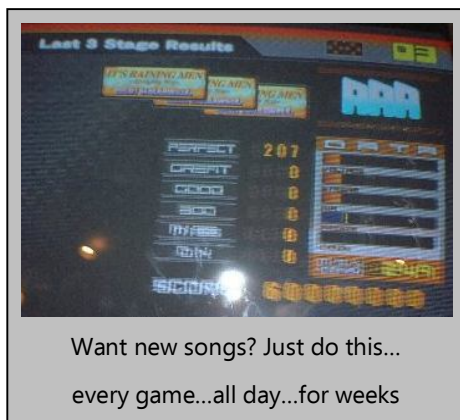
nonstop/challenge course) primarily to play a song not normally available in regular play.

Even though this mode was geared towards the more experienced and skilled players, and the game warned that this particular mode was not intended for beginner players, there were a number of easier courses that were doable even by lesser-skilled players.

During the Max 2 days, players at reasonably high skill levels continued to get their AAAs but this time there was a purpose to it all. The way the unlock system (for additional, hidden content) worked on Max 2, a player could rush the system and get new songs and courses earlier than normal play by means of AAAs (any difficulty). What this ended up doing for two particular arcades (one in Kanto and the other in Kansai) was start a race to see which arcade could unlock the whole game the fastest. As it turned out, the Kansai team won by unlocking everything in 1 week, 5 days. Similarly, the Kanto team did it in 2 weeks and 1 day. (For those interested, the arcade in Kanto was Zama Muthos, though the arcade in Kyoto is now long gone. However, the arcade in Kyoto was open 24 hours a day which gave them a distinct advantage).

The amusing part about this unlock system was that Konami expected it to take much longer to complete than it took a number of arcades. The speed at which players fully unlocked the game rendered Konami's planned periodical release of special operator codes to unlock new content in installments redundant for many. The first partial unlock code was released after the entire unlock contents were made known from this AAA race.

Granted, players could only play all of the unlocked content on a fully unlocked arcade machine at the time, but there was no surprise to the unlock



contents anymore. One of the suspected reasons Konami does not have any machine-level unlock system like this in place anymore is because of the AAA race and the fact they overvalued the difficulty involved in getting an AAA (any song/difficulty) while at the same time underestimated the skill of the hardcore players of the game (this became an issue again at the DDR Extreme test location event). Even

so, the reaction from players and arcade 'teams' not quite capable (or wealthy enough) to AAA songs all day was mostly neutral. For the most part, the only players frustrated with this turn of events were the ones that were at a relatively high skill level at their arcade that were also the only one there and couldn't unlock the machine all by themselves at any rushed pace. The only time in which this was a disadvantage was during the Internet Rankings, when those machines with the unlocked content allowed players to practice specific songs in the courses before being made freely selectable to the masses later on with an unlock code. In general a code was released after a set of ranking courses finished and unlocked some of the songs featured in these courses.

For the hardcore players all was good, but there was a small backlash building among the more casual gamers. Even though seeing an AAA in person was still a thrill to the casual players, the playing environment that the more hardcore players inadvertently created drove away some of the more casual players. Literally, one such statement was:

*"It is very hard to play in the environment that these "expert" players create when they play. They get the maximum score or very close on every song and then afterwards they celebrate among themselves. How are you supposed to follow that?"*

- Arcade journal at the Zama Muthos arcade

Some players sought out other small arcades where they could play at their level in relative peace but in some cases it did drive players away from the game.

On a related note, due to the relatively large gap in difficulty between light/standard and heavy modes of play, there was a widening gap in skill that was now very



noticeable. On one side, there were the players that were achieving AAA scores on much of the game on every difficulty level, and on the other there were players that could pass the easier songs all right but

only stumble through everything else. There was no middle ground.

Furthermore, there was a more subtle backlash online within the Japanese community. In this case, the subject of contention was more about the players that take photos and keep records of their scores. Those that took photos or videos of their scores/gameplay were mocked and branded as "otaku" (geeks). This wouldn't have been such an issue except that since certain players were known to play at certain arcades, a rough description and where the player was spotted was usually enough to narrow down who it was they were mocking, putting a face to the player and branding them a target for mockery.

One more slap in the face (so to speak) came from Konami. During the Internet Ranking phase, about midway through the ranking the database server containing all of the registered scores crashed. Konami announced there was no backup, they were so sorry, and to please enter everyone's scores again. That would have been fine if most players bothered to keep an arbitrarily long string of digits lying around. Although some players did find their old scores and registered them again, quite a few players,

even those near the top end of the ranking lists, just chose not to participate anymore.

Finally, there was a very slight backlash from the arcade staff themselves. This was not a common issue, but once in a while there were arcade operators that didn't really like the whole cult



Grrrr, music game fans that attract crowds? Write up fliers for their performances? Advertise the arcade?  
We must stop them all!

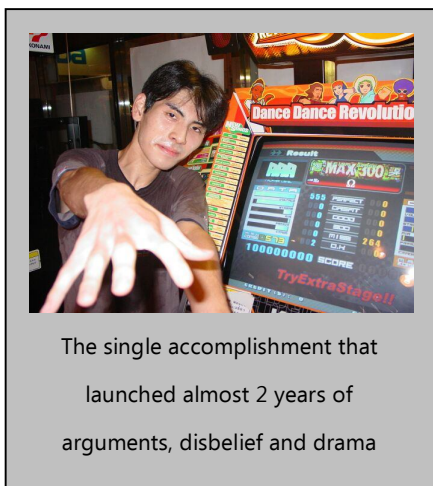
following the DDR/music game genre had appeared to become. (This observation was based on online chatter and the memos in the local notebooks at many arcades) As with the Circo Porto arcade, these arcade journals/notebooks were at many arcades by this time. These staff would sometimes perform subtle actions like turning down the volume of the games or moving them to isolated corners of the arcade, not bother to fix up faulty or dirty equipment, etc. However, many arcades that had reported incidents of this kind of subtle discrimination normally only had one or two music games and also

didn't normally draw many customers. (In addition to the staff not enjoying the music/games themselves) This was subtle but it did stick out enough that the local music game circles were always well aware of these places and knew to avoid them.

This proved frustrating in later years when certain arcades were the only one in the area left with a certain older mix of DDR and it was faulty in some way, usually the stage or screen. There were players (admittedly, mostly hardcore) that would have liked to play these older or rarer mixes again, but the staff remained uncooperative. In some cases, these older machines may have only still been there because it was more expensive to have the game hauled away than to just keep it partially running.

Continuing on, even though perfect scores were not completely uncommon anymore, there was one accomplishment in particular that turned the gaming communities locally and abroad on their head. Up until that point, most players were just struggling to get through the highest difficulty songs (10 foot rating), so when the news came out that someone actually achieved an AAA on one, it was seen as unbelievable and initially dismissed as fiction.

Interestingly, Yasu (as he was known) wasn't the first person to achieve an AAA rank on a 10-footer. A player in Kansai ("Koya" I believe) actually did it a matter of hours earlier than Yasu, but Yasu had more



friends with cameras and video recorders whereas Koya only spread word about it through local BBS systems and blogs.

Yasu did redo his accomplishment and in subsequent recreations, the result was caught on camera. This was still not enough to convince many people, though. As a result, this led to a kind of double effort to show it was real and doable. For the overseas crowds, the local community used whatever equipment they had to try and record this on video, and Yasu, being fed up himself by all the naysayers locally, took it upon himself to go around (with transportation help by his friends) to demonstrate it live. He didn't *\*always\** do it (achieve an AAA rank) each time on command, but he was always



consistently close and usually got it within a few tries, though some days were better than others.

Slowly, the local naysayers were replaced by a collection of people stunned that someone could actually play the game at such a high level of skill. When word got back to Konami that there were players that had been able to get a perfect score on a 10-foot level song, it shocked them as well because although they didn't think it was an impossible task, they didn't expect to see an AAA on one for a long time (the actual name of the step chart creator is lost to time; the news came to me through a representative from Konami)

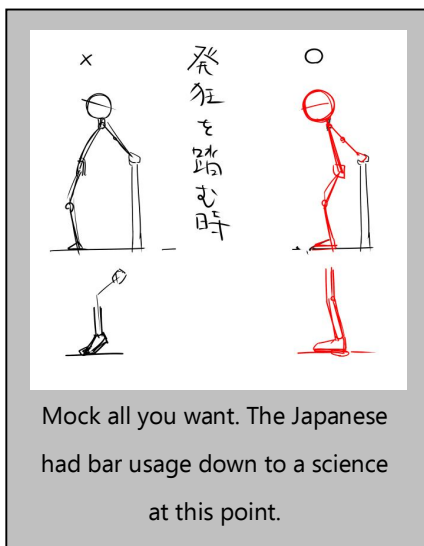
This accomplishment sent shockwaves through the local community and inadvertently shifted the focus of the game to strictly that of scoring. Freestyle performance was somewhere on the back burner, and it wasn't the main focus of the game in many player's eyes anymore. As a side effect, various rants online from the older generation of players sometimes reminisced of "The Golden Days".

Also, as another side effect to this accomplishment, the waves of praise and criticism alike from overseas communities and fans were definitely felt by the local

players. The accomplishment itself caused quite a ruckus and was basically the single dominant topic on DDRFreak (at one time the quintessential site for Western fans of the DDR series) for months. Granted, the photos and videos taken of Yasu around that time were mainly intended for the overseas communities. This brought about some condescending opinions on play style and exposed some difference between the Japanese and Western DDR players. The three big issues in no particular order seemed to be:

1. Usage of the support bar during play
2. Usage of speed modifiers
3. Playing the same song repeatedly

The usage of the support bar at the rear of the stage was a focal point for criticism from overseas fans. Although this kind of play style was not seen before DDR 5th mix, (this started gaining popularity



since DDR MAX, but some players were doing this during 5th mix) it became just one more way to play the game. The news and criticism from overseas to the effect "Oh, that doesn't count because you used the bar" were completely baffling to the local players.

This argument dragged on and on over both sides of the Pacific, although the more vocal players online seemed to come from the West. The Japanese players tended to phase out those remarks and keep on playing regardless, though there were a few small arguments over this on the Japanese BBS "2chan" as well if one looked hard enough. These relatively minor criticisms were nowhere near the majority opinion to the Japanese, though. After much debate and discussion, the most common retorts used by the Japanese players as justification for usage of the bar were:

- \* There is no rule in the game that states the player is not supposed to use the bar
- \* The game/Konami does not punish the player in any way for using the bar nor are bonuses awarded for not using the bar
- \* (This is obscure) In the DDR Solo mixes, the bar was designed to arc towards the player because the bar was specifically meant for player use according to the machine

user guide.

In fact, the obsession over the bar usage argument by the West became comical to parts of the Japanese communities. As a result, every once in a while there would be a subtle jab at the stereotypical Western stance regarding bar usage in various conversations and on blogs and BBS systems such as:

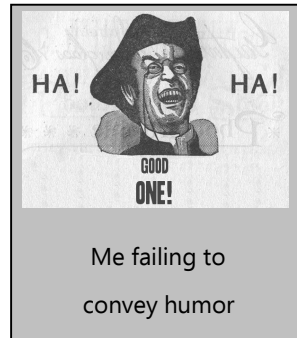
"I passed MAX 300 with a C!"

"So?"

"At least I didn't use the bar"

"What are you, American?"

"HAHAHA, Good one :D"



Similar to the bar usage arguments, the usage of speed modifiers also came under scrutiny. The speed modifier function allowed the player to change the scrolling speed of the arrows and space out the arrow patterns to compensate so that it was still the same song and same chart (also, timed the same); it was just presented differently.

Some players from the West argued that speed modifiers made the song easier since it was easier to read the arrows that way. Similar to the bar usage

argument, the Japanese players didn't see the problem with making use of features built into the game. However, as an additional retort by the Japanese, there was a statement posted:

*"If (Japanese) players are so dependent on speed modifiers that they can't do anything without them, why do the Japanese dominate all of the Internet ranking oni/challenge course lists?"*

*(Note: speed modifiers were not selectable in oni/challenge mode until years after this argument)*

This argument popped up once in a while, even to the point that visitors from abroad still riding on the wave caused by the MAX 300 AAA asked for videos played on "x1 speed" because they didn't think the players could do it. It didn't have to be an AAA all the time, but the goal was to try and show that the scores would dramatically drop entire letter grades the minute players stopped using speed modifiers. (This was a hidden agenda to some) As was proved time and time again in person, this was not the case. On these occasions the Japanese players still managed to AAA a number of songs that way

regardless of speed modifier, with some on them being an AAA rank on the first try playing that way.

Finally, there were arguments about playing the same song repeatedly. (Sometimes known colloquially as "whoring the song out") Japanese players in general thought nothing of repeating a song for a better score. To the more hardcore players, playing the same song for hours on end to try and AAA it didn't even bat an eye to local players.

Some players were originally concerned that the arcade staff or other gamers would raise complaints, but actually that didn't turn out to be the case either. So, whenever someone from the West pointed out to a Japanese player "Hey, you're playing the same song for the (n)th time!" the response was usually along the lines of "So?"

During this part of the DDR community life cycle, a very odd form of elitism emerged, though it was present to a limited degree before. This kind of elitism did not revolve around individual accomplishments, but rather connectivity in the Japanese gamer community. A few of the more prominent players had their own music game blogs and their goal was to try and connect all of the music

game/DDR fans together. This was a fine goal, but what happened was that the administrators of these blogs, sites and groups took it upon themselves to become a "leader" of their own connected groups as more than just the administrator of a web site. They wanted to play an influential and/or controlling role in the community. In a sense, they wanted to



recreate the DDR "teams" from the days in 1999 when such things were common. They also wanted to merge the Japanese and overseas communities together, but there was one distinct problem: the language barrier. It was a thirst for popularity, but only in sheer numbers, not based around any individual skill.

Although these groups were responsible for organizing various tournaments and events, the underlying tone was that "it was so-and-so's tournament" or "so-and-so's event". If you weren't part of that group, you were made out to be

specifically excluded and branded an outcast. The community of music game fans did come together, but they existed in various groups as opposed to any kind of unified community.

The "elitism" came into play and became more and more obvious as some of these groups and their "leaders" had contacts at Konami, and one player convinced them to hold the test location for the upcoming DDR Extreme at the arcade where he worked part-time. He had access to a lot of information about the game, not all of which confidential, but he would restrict it as best he could from leaving his circle of friends. Although enemies were not formed par se, tempers flared when one "group" knew something someone else did but did not share it solely because they weren't part of the "group".

There were some heated conflicts over a few issues, though. Most notably involving step charts and videos/other media thereof. As an example, one member posted a video of the first 15 seconds of a relatively difficult step chart with the message "We worked hard to get this and do not want to share". The interpreted message was "We made this to taunt you because you aren't elite like us (or part of our



group)" The next day, a full video was posted by a member of a "rival" (for lack of a better word) team with the message "Here is the full video. F\*\*k (group/member) and everything they stand for. This information should be public."

Unlike the Max 2 test location, the DDR Extreme test location was under strict security when it finally did appear. I happened to be



Totally \*not\* a leaked photo from the DDR Extreme Test Location version

in line that day from the early morning and witnessed first hand a part-time staffer blocking the screen and jumping in front of players trying to block them from taking down notes, recording media and otherwise recording information on the game. Additionally, there were threats from the arcade staff to confiscate cameras. Of course, song lists and various media were sneaked out which of course enraged this part-time staffer, but fortunately this was the peak of this inter-group rivalry "we-control-the-information" nonsense and the environment for sharing

information and media improved from this point, with old rivals even becoming friends in the end. (Though in a sense, perhaps they always were)

Of course, this same media was leaked overseas, despite the anger of some in the local DDR community that were not happy with that for whatever reason, including the possibility of a backlash from Konami to the effect of no more future public test location versions.

One non-related event surprised the Konami reps (and Naoki himself) at the test location, however. One of the Konami staff sitting at the back was jotting down what songs people were playing and their letter grade result. There were a few AAAs performed on the test location machine and it seemed to shock the Konami staff, including an AAA on Love Shine (Expert) on the first play through of the song ever. Later on the Konami DDR Extreme test location blog, this same representative commented, "We need to be very careful not to cater our step charts and difficulty to players like that".

Whether or not this affected future step charts and difficulty is nothing but speculation, though at the time for every one "expert" player like that, there

were easily a dozen more that were nowhere near as capable of playing to the same level of skill. However, the crowds that attended these test location events tended to predominantly be the hardcore crowd, thus skewing the perceived average player skill level.

The days after the test location event passed quickly, and after a bit of waiting DDR Extreme was released on Christmas Day, 2002.

## 2003-2005



### Keep on, keep on doin' it

After the initial collection (and subsequent distribution) of information and media related to the newest release of DDR (although primarily intended for the Japanese audience, the Western audience eagerly gathered this information as well), players focused their attention and energy on this newly released mix.

Although the licensed music used this time around really didn't impress players that much, the introduction of music carried over from other Bemani series was most welcome. Amusingly, the original music composed by Konami's in-house composers was generally received better than the licensed music despite the fact the licensed music still came from the Dancemania line of CDs.

Players at this time were still in one of two categories; those that could AAA most of the game and those that could do Light/Standard well but only stumble through anything other than the easier "Heavy" charts. There was still no middle ground. Also, there were a few casual gamers at this point, but that was

primarily because of a mini-"team" phase that started up among a number of music game players and fans.

In this era, it wasn't the more skilled players forming "teams"; it was the casual gamer that just happened to frequent an arcade with a core clique of players. None of these teams were ever very "formal". They were almost all scorer groups, and in many cases they were "teams" in name only. Usually the only place someone else noticed a player's affiliation with a team was online where a player name was suffixed with something to the effect "@(group name)"

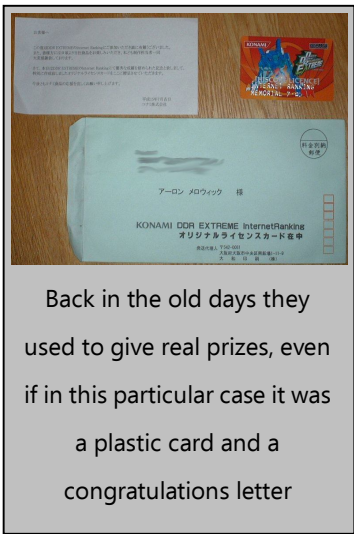


Why oh why was the Muthos crew using the group name "@H.I.V."?

By this time, many of the upper-tier players were competing pretty fiercely for top spots on the Internet Ranking lists. Although not known to the players at the time, this was the last game in the series for which Konami would offer real physical prizes and memorabilia for placing on their Internet Ranking lists. In comparison, for DDR 5th mix, top ranked players received a folding fan decorated with

the characters from the game. For DDR Extreme, players could receive a custom printed plastic card with the Internet Ranking information and the player's name/ranking.

During this time, local players and communities sought out communication with the overseas communities, though the flow of information definitely seemed more biased towards that from Japan directed overseas rather than the other way around. Despite that, this was a period when some players and fans from overseas actually took time out of their trip to Japan (or in some cases, made it one of the focal points of their trip to Japan) to stop by and see in person the



DDR machines, players and arcades they had read about or seen online by means of photos and videos. As a result, there was a bit of deification of certain players from within the Japanese community by those abroad, and getting back to a point from the previous chapter on the elitist groups that sprung up, it did cause a bit of anger and jealousy among some

“rival” players and groups. However, most of the bickering did stay confined to smaller Japanese player groups.

As a result, higher quality media of the players and game started to emerge, primarily because the players locally did not have the money or access to much better equipment than their cell phones and digital cameras. As a general trend, Bemani game fans tended to have lots of money to spend on the games and food/drinks, but didn't necessarily use that for other things. They were not rich by any means; they just tended to spend a greater percentage of their disposable income on the games.

One difference between the Japanese and overseas mannerisms that came to light from these overseas players and visits was that of "shadowing". This was the act of copying / mimicking a player on the DDR stage during play. In short, suddenly jumping on the other side of the stage and mimicking the steps/player was considered extremely rude in Japan, and in general it was almost never done except in cases such as two players playing normally with one failing out mid-song but still kept playing as if he/she didn't fail. Once in a while someone waiting in line mimicked the steps subtly, though that was always

out of sight of the player.

Another phenomenon that was prominent in the West but not in Japan was the "coin line" method of keeping track of players turns on the machine. Basically, this was a method whereby players put a coin, card, or other piece of ID on the machine to signify their place in line while waiting for a turn on the machine, not necessarily waiting in line the whole time.

True, in the earliest mixes of DDR (1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> mixes) coin lines were tried but they soon fell out of use as complaints were raised from players tired of distractions from other players putting coins or cards, etc. on the machine in front of them during play. Thus, coin lines were soon treated as general bad manners and rude behavior. In lieu of this, arcades and the players themselves agreed upon forming a queue behind/around the machine, where leaving the queue normally forfeited the player's place in line. Of course, there were always exceptions (e.g. leaving a personal artifact in line while going to the bathroom). Petty theft in this situation wasn't really a problem (and generally only happened in isolated, extreme cases) as the players tended to respect others' belongings and their place in line. This was



the norm and remained so until the present day.

Over time, the queue system became less strict, and in numerous arcades the honor system of “first come, first serve” was in place. Rarely did this cause a problem. Normally, in cases of uncertainty on who was next to play, players took a step or two towards the machine and looked around at the other players. If no gesture or statement was made, it was safe to play. Of course, players would make some kind of vocal statement if there was a dispute. No real conflicts emerged from this as ultimately someone would relinquish their turn to the other player, though in a handful of cases, paper-rock-scissors was used as the deciding factor. Bullying and threats of violence rarely worked (or if so, only once) and such behavior has been punished with expulsion from the arcade in extreme cases.

Around this time, more overseas players were also gradually able to achieve the same top scores done in Japan. The Japanese players did take notice (though sometimes I had to be the conduit to let them all know about it), and were actually happy to see that there were others that were also playing the game to the level of perfection, like there was a sense of camaraderie between them. There were a few

nuances that did confuse the Japanese though, and they were:

- \* "pad crap"
- \* Counting Songs Remaining / Accomplishments
- \* Tournament mentality (also related to play style)

First, "pad crap" as it was known was simply a "miss" or anything other than Perfect that the player believes was the fault of the machine, stage or system as opposed to the player. One important thing to note is that this would primarily be a Western phenomenon. The reasons for this were compound.

In general, the Japanese machines were kept in excellent condition by not only the arcade staff but by the players themselves by means of wet towels and cloths nearby most machines that were used to wipe down the stage. The staff would regularly clean and maintain the machines because players usually had easy access to machines at other arcades, and if the machine at the arcade wasn't working, the players could just go somewhere else where there was a machine that worked well.

Furthermore, the mentality in general among the

Japanese DDR community was that if you saw a "boo", "miss" or other non-combo judgment, it was generally accepted to be the fault of the player.

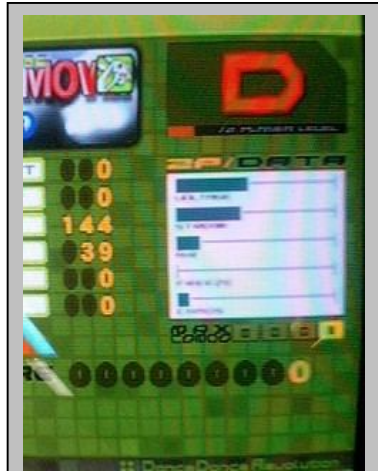
True, if a particular arrow on a machine was acting up (or if the machine was flaky due to not being maintained in ages), it was probable to say that the machine was at fault. However, if the machine were giving random errors, the mentality/logic was to go find one that didn't or have the staff fix it ASAP (many places would have such issues fixed same day or the day after).

On an otherwise perfect machine, any such random "boo", "miss" or anything that would break the combo was viewed with the mindset "Aw, tough break" and that this unfortunate incident "just happened". Again, in cases like this, even though no direct blame was laid, the player was understood to be at fault first, with the machine only at fault if another player or even the same player was having difficulty on subsequent songs/plays.

On the flip side, there were a few known bugs and exploits with DDR Extreme, and some players would exploit it, but if it crashed the system or messed up a combo because of trying this, the mindset was "well,

you deserved it for messing with the game that way"

This even happened at arcades where a number of expert players would play because they depended on the stage being in perfect condition. Claiming an accomplishment along with the statement "ignore the misses, greats, etc. because the stage was acting up" was generally shunned



Of course, some players aim for terrible scores on purpose.

because there would be no way to prove that the steps in question would have been perfect even if the machine wasn't acting up, assuming it was acting up at all.

As a consequence, reading or hearing of accomplishments abroad, particularly in cases where AAAs were claimed "with a pad miss" or more so "pad great", would cause players to roll their eyes (figuratively), despite the fact they were aware the machines overseas were not kept in as good a condition as the ones locally. This continued right up to the present day, where asking for the local

expression for "pad crap" to Japanese gamers would draw blank stares, even though the concept was understood, because this concept was not a part of the play mindset when striving for, and proclaiming accomplishments..

Moving right along, there was a difference in how accomplishments were tallied and how many "songs were left" as related to those accomplishments. As perceived by the Japanese players, for whatever reason players abroad that played for AAAs would tend to only count songs on "Heavy" or "Oni" difficulty, primarily on single mode (4-panel play), though those rare few with access to the somewhat rare 6-panel mode on DDR SOLO cabinets also tallied those in their count.

The "playing on single" argument was understood because although joint premium mode (playing on double (8-panel mode) for the same price as single) was common in Japan, but was not so abroad. That argument made sense despite the fact there were local players that would (and did) gladly pay double the price just to play on double mode. In general though, single mode play was the same price as double mode and "versus" (2 player) play, (100 yen at most places, 200 at some of the more expensive

venues) though in later mixes “versus play”, or 2 player mode, cost the equivalent of 2 one-player games. (200 yen at most arcades, 400 yen at some of the more pricey arcades) Prices did tend to drop as the game aged in the arcade, though.

However, even disregarding whether or not “joint premium” mode was enabled on a DDR machine in Japan or abroad, the fact remains that relatively few players out of the total pool of players in the West tended to play double mode seriously at all. In the modern day, the type of players in Japan that focus on perfecting simpler songs did not usually draw a line between single and double modes and played both. To a degree, this is also true with the more adept players in Japan today, though players usually had a preference for one mode over the other.

For the more hardcore players of the time however, double mode tended to take a backseat to single play mode. There were still a handful of players that focused primarily on double, though in general players understood single play mode as a base and developed skills in double mode.

This is a shame because the dynamic when playing on 8 panels is different than that of 4 panels. Not

only this, but the patterns, rhythms and general difficulty sometimes varied greatly from the single mode counterpart.

As a result of these factors, there did tend to be some ignorance regarding double mode play and charts on double mode in general. With the Japanese, it was more due to the fact they just generally didn't play double mode enough to know, and the most common way to get them to play was by word of mouth that a particular song/chart stood out on double mode for whatever reason.

Still, the players of double mode in Japan were not mocked, and they arguably drew more attention to themselves when playing since they were moving to cover more of the stage during play. In terms of accomplishments, nobody thought any less of something done on double mode, though without understanding the differences in charts between single and double modes, not too many accomplishments were viewed in higher regard just because it was done on double.

There were a handful of players abroad that also played double mode, though in the eyes of the Japanese players they were seen as strictly in the

minority relative to other players of the West. This was not a bad thing, however.

In fact, one of the regrets from some of the players in Japan was that there were not more double mode players. If anything, it made the players in the West that did play on double mode stand out that much more. Some of the Japanese players still regret not being able to meet up with these players from the West, though being able to see them on YouTube and elsewhere online was a great thrill.

Another point of difference tended to be that the Japanese DDR players also tended more to be completionists

and cared to play all of the step charts on Light and Standard modes as well.

To them, a song wasn't truly

"finished" unless it had been AAA'd on all difficulties, single and double. Playing only the "Heavy" or "Oni" charts was good enough for most intents and purposes, but there were many subtle and/or tricky



Who cares about the AAAs on the easier difficulties if you already have it on Expert? The Japanese, it seems.



step charts, particularly on the boss songs and for the songs on standard difficulty on double mode since some of those were harder than the so-called Heavy/Expert charts. In mixes prior to 3rd, there was no double Maniac/Expert mode, so the double "Standard" chart was the Expert chart, and in quite a few cases the "Standard" chart was more difficult than the Expert charts added to later mixes.

In short, "finishing" DDR Extreme meant getting an AAA rank on all songs on all difficulties, single and double, regardless of the time and costs involved with playing every chart on every difficulty. Talk of "finishing" the game by only counting the "Heavy" and "Oni" charts on single mode would draw responses such as "but that only makes up less than 1/6 of the charts in the game!" Although it was understood that many of the "Light" and "Standard" charts were complete cakewalks in comparison, the exceptions to the assumed difficulties of the "Light" and "Standard" charts made the local players not rule them all out altogether.

Finally, there was a slight difference in play mentality as it pertained to tournaments, which widened as years went on.

Tournaments in Japan were generally planned out a few months in advance and were almost always a single elimination format. The general pattern was that the qualifier round and the next round or two after that consisted of a preset series of songs known to the players in advance. The final rounds then consisted of a best of 3 (or 5) songs in general, chosen by each player in turn. Modifiers such as speed modifiers, turn modifiers (to rotate the step chart pattern by 90 or 180 degrees) and use of the bar were always fair game except where explicitly forbidden, but even then that was generally only the case for "gimmick" rounds such as requiring players stand behind the stage and put their legs through the space under the bar to play, playing a song all on one foot, etc.

It is important to note that because of the gambling laws in Japan, monetary prizes were not awarded at these kinds of tournaments.



Of course, no tournament would have alcohol for the winner...

The only place where this was legally allowed was at a tournament officially run and sponsored by Konami. With the pressure of a grand prize alleviated, the players could focus more on just having fun and meeting up with fellow music game friends. Also as a consequence, entry fees were negligible in many cases and even free in others. Although from a Western point of view one might question why people would enter a tournament at all with no real "grand prize", the chance to meet up with friends and fellow fans of the game to have a good time was more than enough of a draw to get players to go. As a result, prizes tended to be random candy or toys/merchandise from the UFO catchers at the arcade, or even a certificate in some cases.

Furthermore, it is amusing to note that although competitions were indirect in the sense that what one player did not directly affect the other player, the mindset was also similar in the sense that it wasn't one player vs. another so much as it was one player and another player competing to see who could beat the machine at its own game the most.

The last point regarding tournaments involves preparation. Since the song list was known beforehand, the recommended strategy was to know

all the songs in the game, with maybe not so much effort focused on the 10-footers since they were not even used in a number of tournaments anyways, and even when they were used it might have only been in the final rounds. Then, the players would practice the songs on the tournament song list like there was no tomorrow. In later years, a popular opinion/strategy suggestion, particularly from the West, was to the effect "don't whore (overplay) songs" but in this era, "whoring songs" was the way players won tournaments in Japan. This was also the way I (the author) won a few tournaments here.

Some players practiced on the home versions as well, but usually only to watch "practice" mode and to memorize when the "assist ticks" would sound to better help them with their own timing. The reason this was used as opposed to a PC simulator like Stepmania was primarily because the players wanted to practice using the exact timing Konami used instead of a "reasonable guess" by a step chart artist. Furthermore, the algorithms used to measure the timing windows differed between Stepmania and a real DDR home version. Stepmania measured timing windows in milliseconds whereas DDR measured them in frames.

In general, a Japanese tournament in this era had a number of players scoring an AAA on a number of songs, sometimes by both players in the same round. Tie breakers were still not *that* common as the results were usually based on machine score, which weighted steps at the end of the song more heavily than ones at the beginning. As such, ties were not that common even when players had the same number of greats/goods/etc. in their result.

If you read between the lines in this chapter, you might have figured out that tournaments in general were not won on the 10-footers, but on the random 8 and 9 footers. Players banked on the hope the other hadn't practiced a particular song to the same consistent level of precision, and the round could possibly finish without having to play the 10 footers at all. This is not to say that seeing players battling on the hardest songs wasn't thrilling, as it was. However, not all players tended to be as good on the hardest songs, and their chance to best a "better" player on something added to the excitement, especially if the scores were very close.

That being said, this pattern continued until around the end of 2004, where most of the "major" tournaments of the time were finished. (There were

smaller local tournaments for a while yet, though)

There was always the option of custom step chart data, though that never really gained in popularity except as a novelty. As it was perceived in the West, players actually placed custom step charts (including content for Stepmania) on the same level as "official" charts, and these charts also gained widespread popularity. This wasn't the case in Japan where there was not much in the way of custom step charts (or Stepmania songs) that reached the masses with wide acceptance.

The closest a custom step chart project got to widespread popularity and recognition in Japan was the "Foonmix" project. This was organized and created by one of the DDR "groups" mentioned



We could all play Para Para Paradise...no wait, that's been dead for years, too

earlier. Although a considerable amount of effort was put into getting it all finished and released, it still never reached mass worldwide or even Japan-wide levels of popularity.

At this time, many of the players, particularly the hardcore ones, were more or less done with DDR Extreme. The mix was stale in the eyes of the Japanese gamers, and there were no announcements from Konami at that time that a new arcade mix was to be released. Furthermore, the team behind the arcade release of DDR Extreme had long since been shuffled off to different divisions of Konami to work on other titles, as acknowledged in the DDR Extreme blog in which some of the programmers and staff left “Thank you” notes for the fans of the series and messages that they were moving on to other projects.



Players didn't know how to interpret "We are starting over!" From this mix? The next? A different game?

Additionally, the ending credit roll from the home version of DDR Extreme reiterated the whole “Thanks to all the players” farewell in a similar tone. Even the exclusive song from the home version of DDR Extreme, “Max. (Period)”, has been theorized by some as hinting DDR Extreme was the end of the series based mostly on the background video catering to the oldest fans of the series with nostalgia in the form of a player selecting and playing “Paranoia” on the first mix of DDR.

Many players thought this was the last release of DDR and slowly, players (even the more hardcore ones) simply stopped playing or moved on to other games such as Beatmania IIDX. To this day, primarily because of the very long gap between the releases of DDR Extreme and SuperNOVA, players usually remember DDR Extreme as something that started great, but became a very stale mix, and there aren't many that actually wish to play it again today except for perhaps the songs that were exclusive to that mix.

During this time, there were two new home versions of the game, "DDR Festival" and "DDR Str!ke". Both were launched with much fanfare, including appearances by some of the musicians and licensed artists at places like Velfarre, and a cross-promotion with the 2005 movie "Rize" in Shibuya DUO.

However, fans of the series went to these events primarily for the event itself rather than the home version game being promoted. (DDR was after all perceived to be an arcade experience) At the DDR Festival Launch, there were many of the artists from BeForU, music producers Naoki, U1-Asami, and an AAA tournament where the winners received autographed merchandise.



The “Rize” movie cross-promotion was amusing, and players were quick to note there was an understandable logic to it all (‘dancing simulation game’ -> ‘dance movie’), but even though it piqued some interest with the promotion clip on the game disc, “Rize” wasn’t exactly the mass success the producers might have hoped. Though



Above : DDR Festival Launch  
Event/Tournament for autographed  
Konami/BeForU merchandise

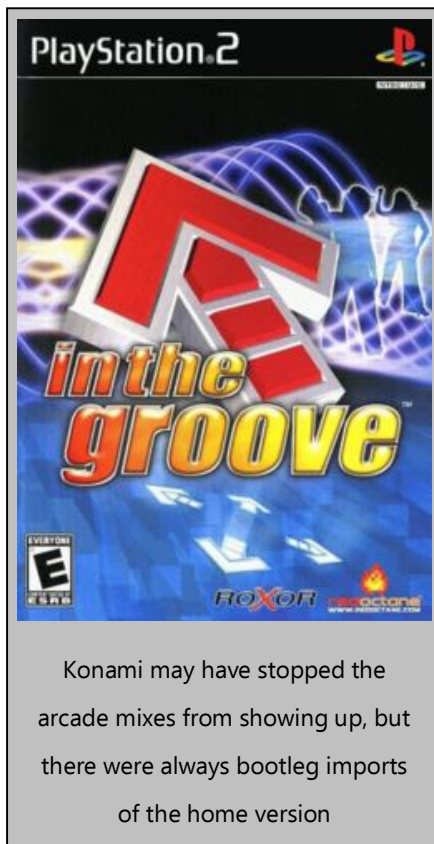
Below : Rize movie  
cross-promotion at Shibuya DUO

to its credit, the few others I know that had seen it (including myself) found the movie far more entertaining than the other movie tie-in found later in DDR SuperNOVA, “Back Dancers”.

However, the next arcade DDR mix wasn't to be released for more than a year after that event in 2004. The scene had pretty much died out, though the more regular players were still in touch with each other online, and there was always the curious venture into foreign web sites to find out what was going on in America and Europe.

One particular event noticed by the Japanese was the

development and release of a game called "In The Groove", by the now-defunct American company Roxor. Even though due to legal action by Konami, "In The Groove" (referred to hereon as ITG) never saw the light of day in Japan apart from a notable exception of one arcade (World Game Circus) that was only open for a little over a year.



Konami may have stopped the arcade mixes from showing up, but there were always bootleg imports of the home version

The home version of ITG was available through import shops in Japan, though it was expensive. I received a few copies along with a soft pad for the sole purpose of having the Japanese players try it out and give their feedback (more on that later).

With no new DDR on the horizon apart from a couple somewhat disappointing home versions, ITG was seen as something that had potential to surmount DDR, but no Japanese player knew if they could ever really take the series that seriously since it was highly unlikely that arcade mixes would find their way to Japanese arcades.

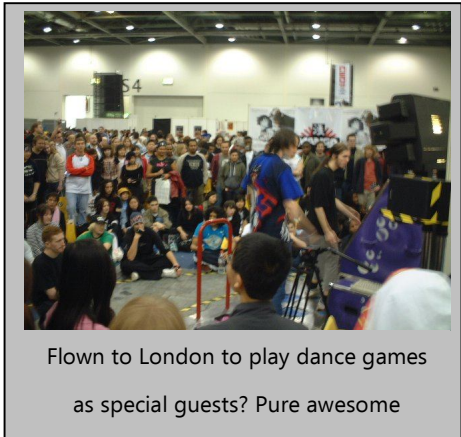
A few players did give the home version a try and although there were songs and charts that players did like (Xuxa, Queen of Light, Charlene being noted), there was a general impression that it focused more on fast, stamina draining charts at the upper end of the difficulty spectrum. It was seen as being on the brink of an overachiever's game only. This wasn't necessarily a bad thing, but it wasn't something that the locals were dying to do, either. The locals in general actually preferred songs and charts at reasonable speeds that had complicated rhythms, like it were a puzzle to solve.

Somewhere amidst this, there were rumors about the release of the next game in the DDR series and fans promptly took note and became excited at the news. Even though most news about the new title didn't arrive until the following year, in the West it was perceived (by the Japanese) to be a knee-jerk reaction to ITG. Even in Japan, there was a little bit of the feeling: "Oh, if we (Konami) don't do something, ITG or something like it might take hold and overtake our market! (That we had been neglecting)"

There was a definite hype among the former players for this new mix (DDR SuperNOVA). Unfortunately, some of those that quit DDR when they were finished with DDR Extreme, including some of the more hardcore players, did not return, though others did join and take their place.

There is one final thing to note about the communication and relationship of the local Japanese community and overseas at this time. In the fall of 2005, 3 local Japanese players (all right, 2 Japanese and 1 foreigner living in Japan) were flown to England as special guests for the DDR and music game booth at an exhibition in London, England held twice per year. (The London MCM Expo)

Up until that point, there was limited contact online between these two communities, including a random off-kilter request for something special to be done for a certain player's (Yasu) 300th AAA on MAX 300, an accomplishment that caused all sorts of drama and arguments not too long ago. The hospitality



and courtesy received both before, during and after the London MCM Expo spread throughout the Japanese community by word of mouth, online, the web site DDRUK, the Administrator (Colin) and to a lesser extent the associated community, were all held in very positive esteem.

Even though most Japanese were still too shy to post on an English forum based in the UK,, let alone in English, many players did view that site as a portal to the outside DDR/music game world despite the existence of many other fan sites of the same nature, and also used it for resources such as step charts and files related to DDR simulation on their PCs.

# 2006



## Let Us Fly

Even though DDR Extreme was long dead in the eyes of the players and arcades had been getting rid of their machines over the past several months, there was high hope for the next mix (DDR SuperNOVA) that would appear this year. There was not much in the way of DDR community events and get-togethers in the first half of this year, though.

Still, these high hopes remained despite some notable problems at the test location event, the most serious of which being that some songs (especially those with background video) tended to have a random and varying sync between the step chart and the music each time it was played. Another complaint at one test location version in Shinjuku was that the stage was a particularly old one that wasn't maintained that well and the pads were flaky and failed to work periodically, yet the staff refused to fix it. (This was more of a problem with the arcade than the mix, though) Something similar happened at one of the test location versions of DDR Extreme, but Konami staff actually put the event on hold to fix the machine.

One other disappointment was the removal of the functionality to play custom step data. Although it really wasn't \*that\* popular overall in previous mixes, it was nice to have the option to create something the original step chart artists didn't intend and/or something to show off/test the players and their friends.

Of the good things from the test location, players were quick to pick up on the introduction of certain Konami original songs featured in other Bemani titles such as "Xepher" and "Quick Master". In fact, the hype for the music on this mix revolved mostly around Konami's original music and crossovers from other Bemani series rather than any of the licensed music. Even so, in the final release many players did actually enjoy most of the licensed music despite the fact it didn't quite "feel" like the Dancemania licenses of the past

Also, the biggest change of all was the move to make use of the eAmuse network. Now, players could use their all-in-one card (as opposed to different cards for each music game) to track their scores, personal score progress, progress against rivals, personal preference/interface customization and use it as an online ID for automatic entry in events like the

Internet Ranking. This mix was even more exciting since it was announced there were overseas versions, and players could all play and compete together globally in the Internet Ranking events.

On that front, the scoring system was revamped as well. With the previous entry, DDR Extreme, steps later in the song were weighted more heavily than those at the beginning. This time around the steps all had equal weight (in terms of score) throughout the song. This was reminiscent of DDR 3<sup>rd</sup> mix (which also did something like this) and at the same time, this created a 1:1 ratio for Perfect/Great count to machine score in the event of a full combo, a common event now with the exception of the harder charts in the game. As such, tournaments became home to more tie-breaker rounds because of this change to scoring.

One last notable detail about this mix was the revival of the 3-D rendered dancing "characters" that appeared in-game in previous mixes of DDR up until 5th mix (from Max to Extreme, the background consisted of pre-rendered animations only). To the overseas market, it appeared to the Japanese that there wasn't \*that\* much fondness for bringing them back, but this was definitely something the Japanese crowds were happy to see.



So, after much waiting, DDR SuperNOVA was finally released. Fortunately for the players, there were a number of arcades that had given away their



old DDR Extreme machines long ago but had acquired new ones for this release. Other arcades fixed up their machines, cleaned them and made them appear good as new.

The initial release drew a lot of attention by all music game fans. Some of the former hardcore players from the previous generation of DDR came back to the series and did their best to score an AAA on every song in the game, including one whom spent the majority of the first day of release playing one song in particular just to say he AAA'd it on the first day. (The player was Fujitake and the song was Xepher on Challenge difficulty for those interested) Even apart from the hardcore crowd there was enough hype that even the casual gamers and other

random arcade goers took notice, at least initially.

The eAmuse system was well received, though through the eyes of the players it wasn't much more than a modern replacement for the PS1 memory cards used to store high score data for previous DDR mixes. There was one additional eAmuse feature that was immediately noticeable though, and that was the "eAmuse record" top score for each song shown in the brief moments between when a song was selected and when the round started.

When this mix was first released, the policy for these record scores was that the highest one was shown, but a score that tied the older one would not overwrite the previous player/score record for that song/difficulty. This was a slight problem to the more skilled players at the time since almost all of the songs in the entire game on all difficulties, single and double modes, were AAA'd within the first 3 days. There were simply not many records left to take and the eAmuse high score data was almost a completely static list by this point. Indirectly, this was almost demotivational to the more skilled players.

This policy was changed a short while later through a software patch that was applied automatically over the eAmuse network to all of the connected



machines. (Which was pretty much all of them in Japan) The new policy was changed so that scores that tied the old one would overtake the record. This was a small change, but it was received exceptionally well, especially by the more hardcore players, and it became a very subtle glance at what other (admittedly, more skilled) players had been doing/playing.

One other feature the eAmuse system provided resulted in something that was viewed with skepticism by the Japanese gamer community. Konami assisted in promoting the locally produced movie "Back Dancers", a film that has been jokingly compared to the film "You Got Served" as well as other B-movies to the effect "'Back Dancers' makes 'You Got Served' (or any other B-movie) look like

cinematic perfection in comparison”.

This promotion was done by means of a one month unlock of a special song and course. However, the song and chart as it appeared in the game was ‘broken’ as players immediately noticed. For whatever reason, the arrows did not scroll smoothly and stuttered their way up the screen against clips from the movie in the background.



Don't kid yourself, this movie makes "You Got Served" look like cinematic perfection in comparison

The promotion as a general concept wasn't a problem, but there was worry that DDR could become full of in-game advertisements and promotions. (Apart from the obvious promotion of the licensed artists and songs used in the game)

Of course, this isn't to say that the SuperNOVA system was perfect and there was nothing wrong

with it for any of the players. There were some common complaints about the system/step charts from within the more regular and hardcore player groups. (Both those that started DDR from the older mixes and those that started playing from DDR SuperNOVA) This didn't define the characteristics of all DDR players and what they found difficult, but it did serve as a common base for conversation at times, including but not limited to:

*\* Gradual BPM changes*

*\* Slow songs (because of the associated broken quantization the game used to compensate for system limitations related to quantization at slow speeds)*

*\* Rapid jumps (debatable; this was more of an issue with a few groups of regular players than the entire Eastern fan base as a whole)*

Gradual BPM changes were (and to a degree, still are) the bane of many players in Japan. This was noted from overseas players too, but this was definitely more noticeable in the East. Even to this day with the most recent mixes the songs over which the more regular players will gripe to no end are the ones with a gradually changing BPM, even more so than the hardest songs in the game.



Many of the players used the beat/audio to help keep them in time, even when they were playing by relying mostly on the visual clues of the arrows reaching the casting at the top. A sudden BPM change was actually not too big of a problem because it was seen as two different sections of the same song and treated differently, with the player just having to remember at which point in the song the transition(s) occurred. However, the gradual BPM change blurs one section into another and many players found it awkward to try and time the steps in those sections regardless if players tried to work it out based on visual clues or the music.

On to the next point, slow songs were not such a

problem in theory, though some players were annoyed by songs that were too slow for personal reasons. The problem was that to have any kind of step pattern that moved at a faster speed compared with the BPM of the song, the chart may have had 16th note steps or syncopated patterns. The problem with the syncopated patterns was that the system did not properly quantize the steps to the rhythm and as a result the player had to step at a stuttered rhythm to compensate. This was not usually an issue with the faster songs.

The last point was about rapid jumps. This involved either a rapid series of jumps one after the other (not necessarily all on the same two arrows) or a stream of steps and jumps together.

As I mentioned in the list above, this was debatable to add, but big enough of an issue that I think it deserved notice. This phenomenon was most harshly criticized by players that started playing DDR from the



Several jumps in a row wouldn't be such an issue if twitching like a jackhammer were more common

older mixes. Although most other patterns were no problem, rapid jumps were not done in groups of more than 3 until DDR Extreme, ("DDR 3<sup>rd</sup> Mix Ver. Korea 2", never released in Japan, featured charts with more than 3 in a row though almost no Japanese players had even heard of, them let alone played, that mix) and the only other place a player could have seen long streams of them was by means of custom edit data (custom step charts). During the DDR Extreme days in particular, edit data that relied on rapid jumps as a gimmick caused all sorts of havoc for players. One reoccurring theory about the hatred for these patterns was that the mindset that "these patterns were like the gimmicky custom step charts of old and only meant to annoy the player" and may have been the root of the mental block that seemed to result from this.

For the record, two elements of play that players from the West tended to consider "broken" or "annoying" more so than the Eastern communities (for who these may have not irritated at all) were:

\* *Crossovers*

\* *General syncing of the steps to the music*



Crossovers were basically defined as a pattern which, when performed with alternating feet on each step, required one leg to "cross over" the other in a turn or twist to step on another arrow (and continue the step pattern in one continuous stream). The term for this pattern in Japan was "Biji step", based on the title of the song "Strictly Business" from DDR 1<sup>st</sup> Mix from which these patterns first appeared.

In Japan as well as abroad, one of the best known examples of this was in the song "Afronova" from DDR 3<sup>rd</sup> Mix. That chart and the way it made the player move and twist their body (and facing the side) to do whole sections as one constant stream was seen as brilliant in Japan. Even with other songs and charts that made use of this in later mixes, there was never a hatred for requiring the player to cross their legs one over another, though it did trip up the unsuspecting player once in a while. They are understood as part of the game and the players compensate accordingly. Only at very fast BPMs did players in the East start complaining about this.

The mention of the general syncing of the steps to the music in this list was another debatable entry. True, when players talked about a song for which they



seemed to score an unusually large number of greats or other non-perfect steps, someone else that knew the chart would comment to the effect "Oh, try to step a bit early on this chart" or "How about trying to step a bit later than you do normally". Although it would have been nice to have all the charts perfectly on-sync, even the perception of what was "on-sync" differed between players.

Some players played based on the audio cues while others relied more on visual cues. Sometimes players that did very well by relying only on the audio would say the syncing was fine whereas someone playing visually would say it was early or late. There were cases of songs universally agreed upon to be off-sync though, especially with DDR SuperNOVA. Any song with a pre-rendered background video

tended to be late and there was a specific song, "Red Zone", that was always really late on the Japanese SuperNOVA cabinets, which was a shame because that was a popular tune at the time to the Bemani gamers of the era.

That being said, the more skilled/hardcore players (or those that just put tons of money into the machine) tended to achieve their personal goals for the game rather quickly, in only a few months. At that time, although nobody had AAA'd some of the hardest songs of the mix like Fascination Maxx or the Eternal Love Mix of that same song, players didn't really care. The mindset that 95% of the game was AAA'd and the rest was "pretty close" was good enough for some. There were always a few players that continued to plod away at the hardest songs, but there wasn't much change in the top scores for those songs, and these players were in the minority.

There was an encore Extra Stage that was full of BPM stop/pause "gimmicks" called "Chaos". Although everyone knew it was a gimmicky chart, it was a sudden obsession among the players to play, pass it and then show it off at another arcade or for a different crowd. For many, it was a race to see who could pass it first among their own local circle of

friends. This wasn't anywhere near a cultural phenomenon, but it did turn a few heads in the arcade whenever someone played the song.

So, with the more dedicated crowd busy on their own, what became of everyone else? Well, there was an initial rush of newcomers and casual gamers to the game though after a few months they weren't playing that much anymore themselves. There were quite a few tournaments held by the players though, and that kept even the hardcore players that were more or less finished with the game playing. The big events that kept the players (and machines) busy, though, were the Internet Ranking events.

The Internet Ranking events were

different this time in that the registration of scores for the Japanese players was all automatic from the

RANK		DANCE NAME	PREF	SCORE
1		BJ	愛知県	5143
2		MIKI	岡山県	5131
3		HA...H-2	神奈川県	4981
4		SHOCKU	埼玉県	4959
5		II	埼玉県	4927
6		EVERDANCE	千葉県	4787
7		666	神奈川県	4633
8		YARD	神奈川県	4603
9		DMC4P399	---	5477
10		AT SMO	愛知県	4444
11		92	神奈川県	5104
12		DDA-BOUT	兵庫県	5143
13		MIMAMEX	埼玉県	5144
14		ENNA	兵庫県	5131
15		MATCHIE	埼玉県	5055
16		BOE-BIG	大阪府	4893
17		SACRAMENT	神奈川県	4876
18		YORINA	兵庫県	4784
19		SBC	東京都	4777
20		G-E-S	埼玉県	4684
21		RIN	大阪府	4625
22		SAMBAZE	岡山県	4582
23		G-E	北海道	4571
24		CARDOL	岡山県	4550
25		CROOOLA	埼玉県	4547
26		DNA	兵庫県	4255
27		TAMA-AIK	埼玉県	4076
28		RY-C-	兵庫県	4064
29		ASHAKAS	埼玉県	4048
30		BOLICKY	---	3724

It was always nice to see players on the Internet Ranking list that weren't Japanese

game machine over the eAmuse network. The act of writing down codes, names and scores to register from a PC later was made redundant. When a player finished a course, their score was automatically registered right then and there.

This was good and bad because although it was instantaneous, some of the more self-conscious players did feel a bit embarrassed about having a less-than-great score registered with their name automatically. There were requests made and discussions online about wanting a feature to ask the player if they wanted their score submitted though nothing ever became of that.

Also, since the rest of the world was not on the eAmuse network at that time, the Internet Ranking lists



were full of Japanese players and very few from other countries, most likely due to the roundabout method players overseas had to use to register. This gave a

very lopsided view of skill, even to the Japanese for whom this favored.

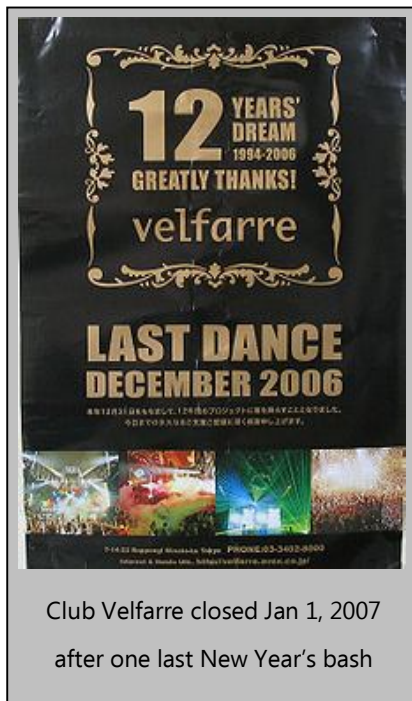
To close off this section I would like to mention that for whatever reason, a few of the players from overseas became well known in Japan thanks to the Internet and various media channels. The three players that really stood out were "Jboy" "MegamanX" and "Pickles". There was no reason or rhyme as to why these three in particular were picked since they all had (to the locals) impressive records and scores, though Jboy was known (according to local DDR lexicons) as "Mr. COME ON!" for his reactions during a video of him during his play of the "Boss Rush IV" challenge course on DDR SuperNOVA. His actions and behaviors in the video were actually so amusing to the Japanese that there were discussions online about pooling money to fly him over to Japan just because he seemed like such an interesting player. This never came to light, but for whatever reason Jboy continued to fascinate the locals, even if by more his personality and nature than his skills at times.

# 2007-2008



## Me Against the Music

As 2007 rolled in, DDR SuperNOVA was still around. It was still getting attention, especially as there were still tournaments being held among the players and the communities they had formed. The music scene took a blow with the closing of Club Velfarre in Roppongi, due to mostly financial difficulties and heavy losses in recent years. The DDR beat (created increasingly more so from Konami original artists, I might add) still went on.



The DDR tournaments of this era were different in that up until this point, tournaments had always come down to at least one or two very skilled players

that put on a good show of skill in the final rounds and the victory was deserved. In this era though, there were occasional tournaments that were kept to local arcade crowds only or meant for amateur (or otherwise non-expert) players. Although there were never any rules forbidding any of the more skilled players in the community to enter, (what would a tournament organizer say anyways? "No expert players"?) in general the smaller tournaments were left alone by the more experienced players and left to the intended audience.

Although this decision may seem to make no financial sense for not wanting such players, there tended to be two reasons from the organizers and arcade staff used to justify these decisions. One reason was that there were a number of players that were extremely discouraged from watching or playing against others at a much higher skill level, and would not participate in such an environment. The other reason was that even though players of very high skill tended to draw spectators, these same spectators would only stay to watch instead of playing games, and some arcades still had signs up stating one of the house rules to be not to hang around for a long time without playing any games



Although these cases were in the minority when talking about tournaments, there were casual players that were discouraged by this and even went to extremes such as outright leaving the arcade amidst higher level play. Although there wasn't as much of a jump in difficulty between the different difficulty levels for



the same song, (at least compared to the widened gap noticed from DDR MAX) there were still players that focused almost exclusively on the easier difficulty levels and shunned higher level play, despite the narrowing gap between difficulty levels.

The next release in the DDR series was announced relatively early in the life cycle of the then-current mix. Even though in retrospect the same length of time had passed from the current mix being released to the next being announced, (as was the case with the older mixes) considering that it was well over 3 years between DDR Extreme and SuperNOVA, the announcement of a new mix not even one year into the DDR SuperNOVA lifecycle did seem extremely

quick in comparison.

One thing that stood out from the test location reports for DDR SuperNOVA 2 was the design and look of the in-game dancing characters. This seems trivial, but in comparison to opinions from the Western world at this point, the dancing characters were an integral part of the game to the Japanese, despite the fact it was something that went on in the background during play. The characters added a familiar style and atmosphere to the game series.



It seems trivial, but the dancing characters are a pull to Japanese fans of the series

Another feature that stuck out was the calorie count displayed at the end of the game. Players were skeptical about the seemingly high "burned calorie count" though many were excited to see it, either to use as a base for seeing which songs burned the most calories, as an excuse/reminder that the player

was burning calories, or in some odd cases even to use as a kind of indirect meal planner for later ("Oh, I burned 750kcal today so that means for dinner I can afford to eat (something that is also 750kcal)"). Some players also set a personal goal of some number of calories burned for their day/play session for health and fitness reasons.

The last big change noted (apart from changes to the scoring system to be discussed later in this chapter) was the quantization "fix". For slower songs where the previous system



Patches and updates occurred regularly. Much like Windows, the game would ask for a reboot after each update.

could not properly quantize the denser step patterns, the player had to compensate by stepping a stuttered rhythm. However, the system now divided beats and patterns more precisely and this made quite a few of the expert gamers happy. The exceptions for this were the players who struggled to alter the way they played to get a good score just because the mindset engraved in their brains told

them to purposely step in a convoluted way.

Although there were many good changes, two changes that stuck out from the test location version that were initially unsettling to some players (though they did eventually get used to it) were:

- \* Step Judgments broken down further to including a more precise "Marvelous" step judgment
- \* The once-hallmark "AAA" had been further divided such that there were different types of "AAA" ranks

The "Marvelous" judgment was used previously in DDR mixes since Extreme, though only in challenge course scoring. Opinions abroad were generally in favor of this timing judgment added to normal play, though locally it was unsettling to some players. This was primarily because one trick players used to make sure they were doing well was to subconsciously notice the yellow "Perfect!" judgment text. Now that there were two different words that meant the same thing, (as it referred to getting an "AAA" in the old sense) it threw some players off. This also was a problem with the more self-conscious players that did not actually want to see the level of judgment get

so detailed (and to be displayed on the results screen) in normal play with no option to disable it, primarily because the extreme case of scoring all "Marvelous" steps was unfathomable on all but the simplest of easy step charts at the time, and something that seemed almost unattainable was a bit demotivational to some players.

Regarding the "AAA" rank, up until this mix, an "AAA" was the hallmark "All Perfect" score. There was no score higher, and that rank signified it. With SuperNOVA 2, an AAA was awarded for a score greater than (or equal to) 99% of the



maximum possible score, or 990,000 points (out of a potential maximum 1,000,000 points). This meant that players could still get an AAA with greats or even a miss or two. The way the new system worked was to include colored circles next to the "AAA" mark to indicate a full combo, combo of all Perfect/Marvelous

steps, and all Marvelous steps (an extremely rare thing to see, even on the easiest of songs)

Although the reasons for the uncertain feelings towards this change may have stemmed from the elitism of some of the expert players or the precocious nature of the slightly less-skilled expert players, some expert players did not like to see "AAA" grades for scores that weren't all Perfect/ Marvelous steps, and some slightly less-skilled players wanted to show off or taunt the expert players with their "AAA" grades on scores that would not have been scored as such in previous mixes.

So, SuperNOVA 2 was released in August about a year after SuperNOVA 1 and there was the usual rush of players anxious to try the next new mix.

From the casual arcade goers or passer-by's perspective, it was DDR but there wasn't any kind of attractor or familiar music to draw them in. By this time, Namco had figured out how to attract crowds by regularly loading up their "Taiko no Tatsujin" music games with well known (to the locals) licensed music that would usually turn heads whenever they were played. (Hey! I know that song!) Regarding DDR, although players and arcade goers wouldn't say they

hated the music in DDR in general, (there seemed to always be a few exceptions based on personal taste) there just wasn't the recognition factor that was there with Namco's line of games. DDR used to have this same effect, but the remixes of popular tunes and licenses from the Dancemania albums that were instantly identifiable were not what the newest mix used. For the gamers themselves, the Konami original music used for the game was arguably more popular at this time anyways.

The next issue that struck the gamers right away was the sudden increase in overall difficulty, particularly on "boss" songs, on all difficulty levels. Although with SuperNOVA, the wide gap in difficulty between the different difficulty levels was slowly narrowing to provide more of a gradual transition for players, there was one tendency with this mix that actually upset the lesser skilled players. (Mostly the ones that focused mainly on basic/difficult charts and stayed away from the Expert charts) Players understood that for a "boss" song, it was meant to be harder than the other general songs in the game, but on the "basic" level, players wondered why there was a need to ramp up the difficulty for the boss songs as well.

The "boss" status was meant for expert players and to the locals, playing on "basic" meant that the player was required to do a rudimentary step pattern almost regardless of the music. However, when the "basic" chart was more difficult than the



average song on "difficult", none of the players on "basic" were going to play that song when they could just play something else on "difficult" difficulty that would probably be more enjoyable for them anyway.

In terms of difficulty in general, even the expert players felt that Konami was trying to pay more attention to overseas opinions and ramp up the difficulty. The problem was that with the exception of a handful of players in the country, DDR gamers didn't want the charts to go absolute extremes in terms of difficulty and gimmicks (e.g. All of the BPM stops in "Pluto", which gamers felt was an overdone "been there, done that" gimmick used in the song "Chaos" from SuperNOVA 1), and felt the "get better



or get out" mentality was a put off, especially since many gamers were happy with songs at a reasonable pace that had complicated rhythms or patterns to work out.

One last gripe noted from many players was the color scheme.

Many players thought the in-game visuals were too busy and distracting. If the player used the "Note" arrow skin, (that made all the arrows change to a specific color depending on when relative to the beat it landed) almost all of the random color schemes used during game play caused one of the arrow colors to blend with the background.



None of this deterred from the initial rush of players upon release, and these concerns were rectified in future mixes, though arguably at the expense of

alienating the overseas fan base. Within the hardcore Japanese community however, this game was becoming even more exciting for a few reasons.

First, there was a change to the scoring system to include "Marvelous" judgment during regular game play. The Marvelous judgment added a lot more variety to the final score. The difference between the two was a measly 10 points, but the difference in score between a "Perfect" and "Great" step was large enough that only in extreme cases could a score with more greats have a higher score than one with more Perfect/Marvelous steps. Achieving a score consisting of all Marvelous steps on a song was almost unheard of except on the easiest of songs, so eAmuse records for songs did change from time to time with hard work. Fan-run scoring sites were also updated to include the new Marvelous judgment in their rankings as well.

Next, there were new personal statistics for the player that were stored and updated on their eAmuse account. There was an "Enjoy Level" by which the player received "points" based on just playing the game, what they played, how they scored, etc. This "Enjoy Level" increased by 1 for every 100 "points" earned by playing the game (it was usually

possible to go up one level at least every few games, quicker if the player was more skilled and could score well on harder songs). As the player's "Enjoy Level" reached certain values, new songs, characters and accessories became available to the player. Another statistic was the "My Groove Radar" which was a personal "Groove Radar" as seen in DDR mixes since DDR MAX used to indicate the player's strengths in the 5 main areas. (Stream, Voltage, Air, Freeze, Chaos) The chart expanded as the player did well on songs that showcased these elements in greater degrees. When any of the elements reached a specific value (100 in this case), a new song showcasing that element in extreme circumstances was made available to the player in the form of a new step chart to an existing song. When all 5 step charts were unlocked, another special step chart was made available that is still regarded as an incredibly difficult chart to this day. (Dead End – Groove Radar Special)

Tournaments also made use of the new Marvelous step judgment, though admittedly the scoring system reflected that as well as put even weight on the score for each step. Thus, tournaments ultimately came down to machine score once again to determine the winner, though this time there was more room for minute variance in the score due to

the new scoring judgment so true ties in score between players became a very rare event.

One new addition to SuperNOVA 2 over the eAmuse network that proved to be popular was the "Zukin Wars". In this event, all players registered on the eAmuse network were randomly assigned to one



The most memorable event from SuperNOVA2

of three teams: red, yellow, or green. During the course of each of the 4 "episodes" that each lasted about 3 weeks, in addition to the team color being displayed in the player's results screens, on the final stage a condition was displayed where, if successfully completed, the player received a random single digit number added to a total number of "dark dancers" defeated. (The random number of dark dancers "attacking" and condition for victory were displayed

before the song selection wheel was displayed on the final stage)

At the end of the event, the team with the most “dark dancers” defeated was rewarded with one of the song unlocks prematurely, though players on other teams that had a high enough score (of “dark dancers” defeated) during the event were also able to play that song as well. This was probably the best remembered event from SuperNOVA 2.

This was something new and different from the usual Internet Rankings, and the conditions were not so difficult so even casual gamers could contribute to their team. Players didn’t have to be godly at the game to participate and win. This was illustrated during the course of the event where many of the more hardcore players noted in their blogs that they all seemed to be on the “red” team. Initially, the fans of the series thought the red team would automatically dominate the event, but in the end they only “won” one of the four events. Of course, many of them played so much that they all received the unlocked content anyways due to their relatively high scores during the event.

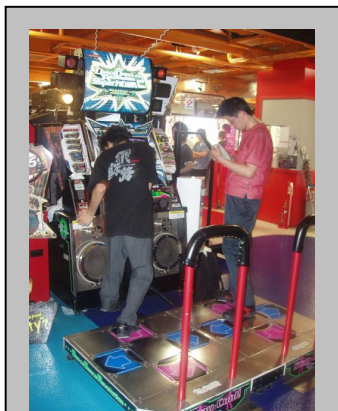
The new songs provided over the eAmuse network

from time to time were nice touches. There were even time-sensitive unlock conditions such that some songs were only available in one mode for a limited time and then made freely available later. For example some songs were only available in "Battle Mode" (refer to the glossary at the end of this book) as part of a limited time event, only to be freely selectable in all modes later. Limited time content premiered on DDR SuperNOVA with the tie-in to the Back Dancers movie, but the new unlock systems did provide a nice variety for unlock conditions, and this would be further expanded upon in later mixes. DDR started to get stale to the players by the time the next mix was released at the end of 2008, but for the time, until the end of 2007 anyway, everything was still going well in the community for the players. However, there wasn't much of an attraction factor to bring in new players to the series, and this situation remained that way even more so in 2008.

With the arrival of 2008 there was a decrease in the number of SuperNOVA 2 machines. This did not happen everywhere of course, but only places with a regular core crowd and/or arcades with no other competition in the local area (that also saw regular crowds) seemed safe. The hardcore players of the era continued to try and best each others eAmuse

records on songs and courses, and more casual players continued to pump money into the machine, but throughout Tokyo machines in lesser-frequented arcades started to disappear.

This did cause a bit of a panic among some gamers, (Is the machine at the arcade I frequent going to be there for the foreseeable future?) though even those that had no SuperNOVA 2 machine in the immediate area tended to seek out any of the older mixes of DDR scattered around Japan, with some players traveling across multiple prefectures just to play some of them (especially the rare mixes). Gamers were hoping that SuperNOVA 2 wouldn't be the last DDR in the series, even if it didn't have as much staying power with the general masses as it did with some of the earlier mixes.



As long as the arcade had frequent players, the DDR machine was safe

There was one last mass effort to promote DDR (and other Bemani series) with the Konami TopRanker

2008 tournament. This was a unique national tournament in that the qualifying rounds could all be done by the players from the comfort of their local arcade during a fixed time frame of a few weeks. The finals were performed at a set venue and interested persons were able to purchase tickets to see the finals live at the Nakano Sun Plaza hotel. However, even though some of the other Bemani series like Beatmania IIDX and Pop'n Music were



The TopRanker 2008 tournament was the first large one in a long time. Also available on DVD

getting a lot of attention, the DDR section almost seemed like an afterthought. In fact, the TopRanker tournament held a few years earlier (end of 2005 to beginning of 2006) didn't even feature DDR as one of the tournament games. Granted, the 2005-2006 era was at a time when DDR Extreme had been out for years and was considered stale and DDR SuperNOVA hadn't been released yet.

Even though the tournament was by and large a success, there were two concerns with the DDR section of the TopRanker 2008 tournament in

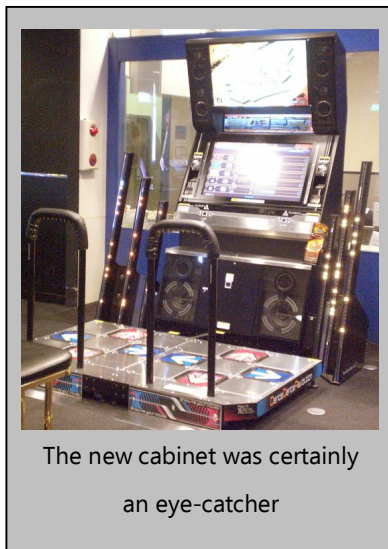


retrospect. One was that the songs featured, even the ones in the finals, were not the hardest ones in the game by any means (for those interested, the final consisted of Paranoia Max, Pluto and Max 300, all on Expert) On a mix that contained much harder songs and step charts, it was a bit of a disappointment to not be able to see the best players play these songs. Even more of a problem was the fact that the previous rounds of the tournament also used songs that were not particularly hard. One of the believed reasons for this was that the scores were bound to be closer and that would make the match more exciting in theory. Even if this were the case, the display of skill paled in comparison to the relatively godly play from the Beatmania IIDX and Pop'n Music sections.

This led to the problem of who to root for as a casual observer. There were more skilled players known throughout the community, but nobody was really viewed as a godly player on the hardest of the hardest songs. Furthermore, with the tournament rounds having players battle it out on relatively easier songs, the victor was just as likely to win due to skill as he was due to a silly error or unlucky "Great" by his opponent. As a result, some fans had argued the hope was just as much to see a raw display of skill as it was to not see their idols make a

stupid mistake (or otherwise have a bad or unlucky day).

So with great joy to the fans, the next in the series, DDR X, was to be released at the end of 2008, and even better it was to ship with new cabinets. This time, the new cabinets were a major upgrade from the hardware used in the past, including a wide screen HD display and amusing (though slightly silly) side panels with giant LED strips that lit up to the beat, changed color during play based on how well the player was doing, etc. For this next mix,



The new cabinet was certainly an eye-catcher

hopes were high that this new play experience would breathe life back into the DDR series.

At the test locations, the game experience on the new cabinet was reported to feel more "immersive". (For lack of a better word) The only other thing Japanese gamers immediately noted was the new difficulty scale (going up to 20 in theory, 18 in

practice). In general, the conversion rate from the old scale to the new was to multiply the rating by 1.5, with the song "MAX 300" being used as the pivot point (10 under the old scale, 15 under the X-scale) and other ratings further away in difficulty from MAX 300 were adjusted based on standard deviation, with some manual adjustments as well. (Showing that ever more, the difficulty of a song is just as much subjective as it is objective) There wasn't much else said on this, though it did help sort out the difficulty ratings slightly better. (As a scale from 1-20 can be more precise than a scale of 1-10 anyways)

One big visual change was the addition of "screen filter" options for the player. No more did oddly colored backgrounds and animations obscure the step chart for the player. This change alone was remembered as one of the greatest features and is still used almost religiously to this day.

Another major change was the introduction of the "shock" arrow in which the player had to not be standing on any of the arrows when it scrolled by. By this time, players were aware of "mines" from other music game series abroad and even from the obscure game "Dance 86.4" by Konami that also used them. The concept of not stepping where there were

no arrows can even be traced back to the “arrange” mode of the home version of the first DDR. Still, this was seen as a slightly dumbed down version of said “mines” since shock arrows could only represent not stepping on any arrow as opposed to a single one.

Opinions in general were mostly neutral though shock arrows proved to be extremely annoying to players on certain step charts depending on how close they were to other steps. Being too close sometimes resulted in setting off a shock arrow that was arguably a misfire.



Furthermore, a new upgrade to an old function was the new speed modifier system. Now the player could choose any speed modifier in 0.5x speed increments from x1 speed up to x8 speed. This was a welcome addition as there were cases in previous mixes where the limited number of speed modifiers made a song scroll either too slow or too fast for a

player, with no nice medium between the two. There have been random "what if" discussions since then about 0.25x speed increments but nobody seemed to think it was really necessary at that level of detail except in extreme circumstances. A speed modifier that scrolled the arrows slower than the default x1 speed was considered to be a nice wish list addition, however.

Another "what if" discussion was the "CMOD" type of speed modifier. This modifier was used in PC simulators and similar dance games abroad as a "Constant" speed modifier that kept a song at a constant scrolling BPM throughout, regardless of BPM stops or BPM changes in the song (dynamically modifying the spacing between the arrows to match the BPM as necessary). Although the local players were aware of the general opinion that scores counted with such a modifier were looked down upon, (since the changes to the BPM during play makes up part of the challenge of the song, very much so in certain cases) it still might be nice to see, even if only to help learn a tricky part of a song containing a gradual BPM change or many pauses throughout the song.

Finally, one noticeable change was the (re)introduction of long version songs. This time around they were known as the "X-Mix" series and these songs were a collage of various other songs to form a longer one. The reactions were mostly neutral on this for the same reasons as the long version songs in DDR 5<sup>th</sup> mix. ("nice, but I'm not using 2 of my 3 song choices to play it" nice) Although none of these X-Mix songs broke the top 30 most selected songs on either local machines or the eAmuse network, players still played these songs from time to time. Musically though, they were generally liked and it was amusing at first for gamers to pick out which songs were used to comprise each X-Mix. Note that these "X-Mix" songs were not the same as the "X-Special" songs which were previously used songs in DDR with newer, more challenging step charts.

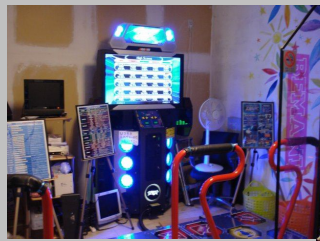
Upon hearing opinions on this mix from overseas, many Japanese gamers were surprised to find that people were rather vocally complaining about the announcer in the game, and even deducted points/score from a scored review of the game specifically for that reason. Yes, during quiet songs a sudden outburst from the announcer could annoy or startle players, but that had always been the case, not specific to any one announcer or DDR mix. The only

gripe about this locally was that the English voice had a thick native English accent when speaking the Japanese phrases in the game. This wasn't a complaint, but just something "cute" that was part of the game, at least as it was perceived in the East.

Similarly, some reviews abroad criticized the "unnecessary urban theme", though if anything, it was a throwback to the very first mixes of DDR, which were also urban themed in parts.

So when the day came at the end of December when DDR X was released, there was a lot of hype for it and there were long lines of waiting players for this much awaited mix.

Amusingly, in the late fall just before the release of DDR X, a small arcade known as "World Game Circus" opened, hosting a number of foreign arcade games, including



Pump It Up, a series that is normally not in Japan



DJ Max Technika, long before a localized version would find its way to Japan

the series "In The Groove" and "Pump It Up" as well as other games from Korea and abroad such as DJMax Technika. Many of the music game fans around Tokyo did go to visit within the next year. In retrospect, the most popular game series there was the DJMax Technika series. "In The Groove" and "Pump It Up" were nice distractions, and local gamers appreciated the variety and were happy to experience a "foreign" title. Ultimately these were just novelties however, since the only place to play these games seriously was at this arcade, and to be honest it was a fair distance out of the way for many gamers. (For those interested, the arcade was located within walking distance from Oyama station on the Tobu Tojo line from Ikebukuro)

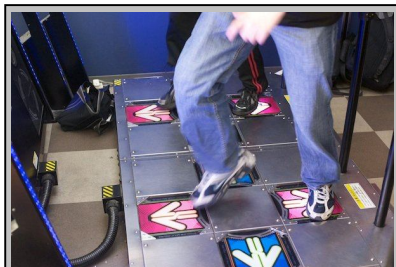


# 2009



## Up Up Down Down Left Right...

So as the New Year rolled in, DDR X was a very hot item. Even arcades with multiple machines (two, three or even four) had long queues of players waiting for their turn. In fact, the lineups didn't begin to die down from the



A nice shiny new stage for the latest mix of DDR. It had a slightly new design as did the main game unit

initial popularity phase for two months (case by case based on location but this was perceived to be the general trend). For players of old and even those that only vaguely remembered the first iterations of DDR, this felt like a rebirth of the series

This all went on despite a few bugs with the game at launch. Although they were patched within days of launch automatically over the eAmuse network, at the time the response by a number of local players was to laugh it off. Yes, the two bugs were annoying, (one caused a random sync/speed mismatch

between the scrolling speed and the song itself, and the other caused lag and made arrows randomly appear/disappear) but for whatever reason, the players believed that a patch would be released relatively quickly to fix it, so they wanted to “enjoy” the bugs while they could. A similar phenomenon occurred with DDR X2 and the players “My Groove Radar” (a personal player stat based on the difficulties of the songs and challenges the player had cleared) being erroneously calculated when entering a specific rival code “0000-0001” such that the graph spiked off the screen.

One event that did happen that was viewed as good for the series was the return of the casual gamer to DDR. Although this was never anywhere near the golden days of DDR 3rd mix when DDR



Where is your God now?



Some people really like glitches.

HADOUKEN!

groups were everywhere and DDR was still being projected into the mainstream, the casual gamers did end up forming their own circles of "DDR friends" once again.

From the expert player's point of view there were a few new options to keep gameplay fresh. In addition to registering "rival" players to allow for score comparison, a software update released soon after launch allowed players to see the progress in score from their rivals during the song. (Difference in score while playing the song, like a "ghost" replay of the rival's top score) Also, although the newer cabinets were a welcome addition, (and helped replenish the dwindling stock of machines) a notable number of the hardcore gaming crowd actually preferred playing on the older cabinets, citing that certain songs felt easier to time on one machine vs. the other.

Additionally, the option to use custom step charts ("edit data") returned. This feature was used in previous mixes but was strangely absent from DDR SuperNOVA and SuperNOVA 2. Instead of the then-defunct PlayStation 1 memory cards, the new system used data stored on USB drives. Players could create custom step data with their home version of

DDR X and export ant custom step data for songs on DDR X or any legacy songs carried over to DDR X from previous mixes. (Though these songs also had to appear on any PlayStation 2 home DDR mix as well for this to work) More ambitious players could use the PC program “DDReditMAX2” to create data for songs not in any home DDR mix as well, though it was never particularly user-friendly to use and there were occasional bugs. Still, this was the only way to create custom step chart data for songs in DDR mixes from DDR X onward and for songs not in any home version of the game.



With the main game system though, one other welcome change was the proper quantization of steps, particularly on slower songs. As mentioned in previous chapters, players sometimes had to compensate their play style to make up for the inability of the game system to properly handle certain beat divisions and quantization at slower

tempos. Although this was addressed to a degree with SuperNOVA 2, on DDR X this issue was more or less resolved, and once-notorious songs like "bag" were playable without having the player overcompensate by stepping a slightly odd rhythmic pattern to try and conform to what the game thought was the correct timing. Granted, there were always exceptions, as one song in particular ("Mikkeneko Rock") actually became harder to play with the "fixed" quantization.

Furthermore, a subtle change this time around was the ability for the player to change the speed modifier during gameplay (at the beginning of the song). This was actually not so well known initially, and was utilized mostly by the hardcore crowd. (Or at least the more serious gamers) This tended to be used either during challenge courses, where different songs had different BPMs back to back, or when mistakenly selecting a song using a speed modifier that made the scroll speed too fast or too slow for comfort.

During the test location version, the speed modifier change was allowed throughout the whole song, but it was removed for the final build. Responses to this were pretty neutral overall in the sense that although

in theory it would have been great to change speeds throughout the song, especially if the BPM changed by quite a bit, the player would have needed someone else coordinating the effort since there was not enough time during play to change it, and even in cases where it was possible it was very clumsy. Also, there was a concern that it would diminish the challenge of a “boss” or extra stage song where having the ability to change the speed modifier could make a normally difficult part of the song easier to overcome. (Diminishing the challenge in some cases)

Finally, with this mix there was a slow change in play style, though the older style still dominated among many gamers. Up until this point, most players played on their toes, which had turned a few heads and drawn a few comments by visitors (music game fans) to Japan from abroad due to it being different from the general stance on “normal” play style in the West. However, playing flat footed was now seen more among the players.

Words can not properly express how popular this entry in the DDR series was with the more hardcore fans of the series. Hardcore



fans dropped an incredible amount of money into this entry in the series. To elaborate, from Konami's own DDR X website, the number of "Marvelous" steps per player in addition to the average number of "Marvelous" steps per game was available for perusal. Using this data, one could estimate just how much players had spent on the game. Using the average of 100 yen per game, the top 10 players alone (based on raw number of Marvelous steps) put a shocking \$42,000 US equivalent (based on the US Dollar->Japanese Yen exchange rate around the beginning of January 2011) into the machine by the time the next game in the series was released.

Of more interest was how even though all of the hidden content in the game was finally fully available

after 10 months, the game continued to draw large crowds, including DDR arcade "groups" that usually showed up on evenings and on weekends. Right up until the release of DDR X2, the game was still



Crowds still line up to play DDR X right up until the next in the series is released.

drawing crowds of both the casual and the hardcore. Even freestyle dance "performances" of days gone by could be seen occasionally.

During the first 10 months of the game's life cycle, there were periodic updates over the eAmuse network to keep the game fresh. For the more hardcore players, the eAmuse records stored the player's personal best score, machine best score, and eAmuse top score per song for all the connected machines in Japan and Asia. (There were no machines in the West connected to Konami's servers) Even when the eAmuse record was out of reach, players could still aim for the local machine records.

The Japanese gamers clearly got what they wanted



from this mix. Unfortunately, word reached the local gamers about the troubles with the overseas versions, including shoddy cabinet builds. Within Japan however, this mix was well loved despite a few small issues. (e.g. The quantization of triplets and other steps was refined even more since SuperNOVA 2) Though on the flip side, some of the quantization and synchronizations of some of the older songs inadvertently made them much more difficult (or just different) from playing on the mix from which the songs originated

Also featured on this mix were the most popular custom step charts created by the players. From the weekly best picks, for the first year it was apparent that either the lesser skilled players or players just wanting a nice, easy step chart were making all the charts that people wanted to play (or in an extreme scenario, the creators and their friends played the same edit data to no end just to get it up on the "Weekly Best" list). Only after an entire year after the release of DDR X did harder step charts start to emerge. From a social point of view, up until this mix, Japanese gamers "finished" with the current mix sometimes ventured out to seek out the older/rarer mixes or play some of the other music game series. This wasn't done nearly as much with this mix for

whatever reason(s), whether it was the features of the game itself or the community that formed around it.

Additionally, although many of the music game fans in the Tokyo area visited the "World Game Circus" arcade mentioned in the last chapter, it was only seen as an amusing diversion, and other than a very small clique of hardcore players (approx. 20), the games there, including foreign and import games, never really took hold. The exception to this was the game "DJ Max Technika", which made use of a touch screen as the input for this music game, which was a pull for many gamers and the primary reason gamers wanted to travel out of their way to find this obscure arcade. Fortunately for the fans, this game was localized and released in Japan at the end of 2010.

Although foreign music game fans visiting Japan sometimes asked where the nearest "In The Groove" or "Pump it Up" cabinets were located, at least there was one arcade in Japan that could be cited, despite the fact the overwhelming majority of "dance game" fans were perfectly satisfied with DDR X, and only the hardcore players really knew of the existence of these foreign arcade titles.

On that note, one different between the West and

East in terms of music gaming tastes was that fans of DDR at this point thought of themselves more as “music game” fans than a fan of any one series exclusively. Players usually had their niche game, but any music game fan in Japan that was adept at one title was more often than not competent at the others. In many cases, such general “music game” fans were better than the average player of any one series. The concept was always the same; it was just the interface that differed.

Communication with overseas communities was very limited, and in most cases indirect. One player living in Taiwan (“Dr. D”) gained mass recognition for his constant barrage of various DDR-related videos, though many gamers in Japan were just too shy or distant to try and contact him directly. Of course, lack of English ability played a part as well.

Tournaments of this era still followed the same basic premise of single elimination. Winners were still determined by score for the most part, though since there was now a 1:1 relationship between step counts pre judgment, (Marvelous, Perfect, Great, etc.) either way of counting the winner produced the same result. There were a few exceptions such as in the case of a questionable failed hold on a freeze arrow or a

general “miss”, but these never (to the best of my knowledge and research) caused a tournament upset. Unlike with DDR Extreme tournaments of the past, the final rounds commonly consisted of the hardest songs in the game (players were allowed to pick songs within a certain difficulty range per stage of the tournament). Again, since tournaments could not be held for money, most of these were large social gatherings for fun and to show off, especially if an entrant had the eAmuse record for a really difficult song and fellow players were curious to see how such a score could be achieved.



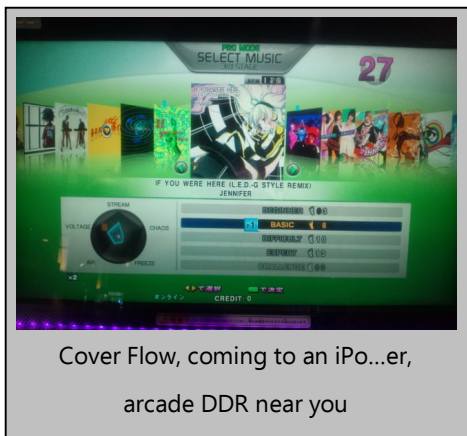
# 2010



## Crank that up to 19

As 2010 rolled in, DDR X was still getting a lot of attention, as mentioned in the previous chapter. Even though all of the unlockable content had been made freely selectable by this point, the crowds continued to pour money into the game in addition to forming their own small DDR circles of friends. Players also formed their own personal “teams” indirectly from their eAmuse rival lists.

Even as DDR X continued to draw crowds, the next in the series, DDR X2, was announced. There was some skepticism over the musical direction since there was a change in the music director for the series and players wondered what was going to be added to the DDR series. (Or changed) At the test location version, the biggest shock turned out to be the interface.



The new "look and feel" of DDR X2 (hereby referred to simply as "X2") was reminiscent of the iTunes Cover Flow interface. Players couldn't get the feeling of using an iPod out of their heads when playing the game at first. This in itself wasn't so bad, except the interface also had a tendency to lag between screens. Players in general were slightly impatient to begin with. When one player finished their game, they would have their bags and everything else off the stage and out of the area as the game ended so the next player could start as soon as possible. When someone was playing their game and they knew what they wanted to play, they wanted to get into the main game as quickly as possible. Thus, any noticeable delay in the interface aggravated them.

One other point that gamers noted was that either the polling system (how the game determined the timing of the player's steps) or the syncing was changed since songs suddenly felt a bit different to play in terms of scoring well. However, this may have been a moot point since the hardcore gamers that had noticed these things were adept at adapting to new quantization/polling/sync of the songs anyways regardless of how it was implemented. Some argued it "felt" easier to score well on certain songs while others were just really sensitive to any subtle change

in what they felt was "correct" in terms of how to score well, and that was related to play style in many cases. For example, a trick used to pull off a certain pattern may have not been so successful in previous mixes but was now more reliable, or vice versa.

In May before the release of X2, there was some sad news as the World Game Circus closed down. Once again, Japan was without any "In The Groove" or "Pump It Up" machines, despite the fact there really wasn't much of a



The owner of the World Game Circus says a final farewell after closing at midnight

following for it when it was available. As mentioned in the previous chapter though, DJ Max Technika did see a localized release later that year.

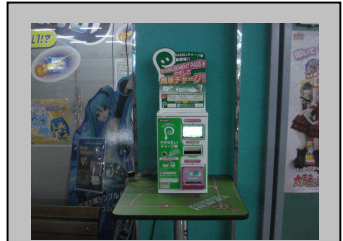
So after a slight delay of a month, X2 was finally released. There were also long lineups to play the new mix, though in retrospect it didn't last quite as long as the lineups for DDR X. That being said, the music in this game was overall very well liked. Not long after the release of the game, there was a

significant amount of online discussion and campaigns to get either a home version of X2 made or at least a soundtrack of the music used in the game. Even though there was never a Japanese home release of X2, the soundtrack eventually did go on sale.

The eAmuse system was used a bit differently in this mix, though one of the most immediately noticeable changes was that the player scores from DDR X were not carried over to X2. This caused initial frustration among the players since some players had spent a significant amount of time and money to get some of their scores. In retrospect, part of the unlock system in X2 required the player to play songs from the previous mix "folders" in the game, so carrying over scores would have defeated the purpose of the unlock system. This wouldn't have been a bad thing for the players, but at the end of the day Konami just wanted to keep players playing the game somehow. In relation to the eAmuse services, Konami introduced a prepaid system to a few of their arcade titles called "PASELI". This prepaid system allowed players to tie money to their eAmuse accounts and use their eAmuse card alone to pay and play the supported arcade titles. This also allowed for new methods of payment such as paying for a game per



song instead of a full set. There were limits at most arcades, however, if not by machine setting then by arcade policy. This also allowed for other possibilities such as empowering parents to create an arcade “limit” for their children when they play, and through investigation of the eAmuse site, a parent could even track down what games were played, when and even at what



In later years there would be automatic PASELI charging stations, however

arcade as well as the overall remaining balance. In practice though, the late teen ~ mid-20s players made the most use of this. This was a nice idea, though some players criticized it for tying up a preset amount of funds that could be used elsewhere and that it was slightly inconvenient to have to constantly “charge up” their PASELI account.

However, some arcade content was limited to players that had a PASELI account (for a while, anyways). One such event was the release of special “Challenge” charts for some of the harder “boss” songs on DDR X2, from the “Replicant D Action” song folder (part of the extra stage system before the songs contained within were unlocked for regular play). For a number

of weeks, the only way to play these special charts was to pay for the game per song, which was only possible through use of the PASELI system.

Of the unlocked content, one part that became known fairly quickly, as mentioned before, was the extra stage system known (oddly) as "Replicant D Action", in which players could select a special song. Clearing the song (initially on Expert only, though that requirement was changed to just clearing the song on any difficulty later) rewarded the player with a "medal". There were 6 songs in total available but the catch was that in order to be able to select a song, the player had to meet specific requirements. One song required playing a number of songs from the "DDR X2" song folder, another required playing 2 songs from every song folder in the game, another required the player passed 5 nonstop courses, etc. The exact requirements were not shown to the players, though through the community site BemaniWiki players shared their common knowledge and soon figured it out.

If the player earned all 6 “medals”, a special Encore Extra Stage was automatically selected and the player had one chance to clear the song “Valkyrie Dimension” on Expert difficulty. This song is significant in that the later-released Challenge chart was the first song in the series since the X-scale ratings system was put in place that had a difficulty rating of “19” out of a theoretical maximum of 20.



As an indication of the difficulty of these songs, the eAmuse/national/world records for the level “19” songs in the game was, and still is at the time of this writing, only a bare AA grade (>95% of the Maximum possible score), even by players that had Perfect Full Combos (AAAs) on level “18” songs. These charts were largely shunned in the West as being too “gimmicky”. In the East these charts weren’t “liked” much better, though there were a few of the most hardcore expert players that practiced them to some level of proficiency.

Also in this mix were time-based unlocks, with new

content triggered by specific dates, time or based on special events. This turned out to lure players on specific dates and times just to get some of the hidden content. It was a small change, but it did tend to shape the times and dates when some gamers played.

To add to this mix, there were event-based unlocks in which a certain game "event" played out after normal play. (Requiring the player to match cards, throw a character through planets, etc.) These events usually ran a month or so and gave ample time for the players to earn all the event- based hidden



Using a dance stage to catch and throw a character through planets to win prizes? Sure, why not?

content. Even if a player did not get all of the unlocks, the content was unlocked as freely selectable content months later. (With some exceptions, though that wasn't just a DDR or Konami policy) It was (and still is) common in Japan for limited time events to run in

such a way that if someone didn't claim a prize or purchase a certain limited time product within the allotted time frame of the event, that person would never be able to get it.

One item of note regarding the hidden content was that the player was more in control of unlocking certain content. This kind of "at your own pace" method of unlocking game content was viewed in a good light since not every player could take time out of their schedule at specific dates or times just to get a new song or character/accessory.

Over the course of the year, new content continued to be revealed, even surpassing the total number of unlocks for DDR X, which had a surprising amount of extra content. The content was always perceived to be good in that it kept the game "fresh" and apart from some smaller issues most gamers were happy with this mix. The hardest songs in the game may have only really been popular with a very small subset of the hardcore Japanese player fan base, but there certainly was enough content available for everyone to enjoy.

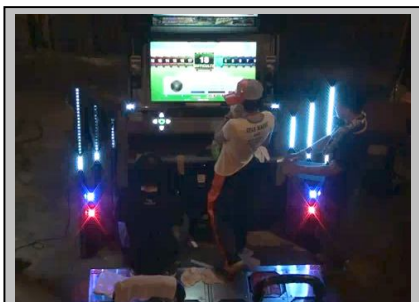
There were still casual gamers and even freestyle performers playing the game as it was with DDR X.

Although it would be speculation to say this mix drew more players to the game than DDR X, (or the other way around) the community did continue to thrive right to the end of 2010.

Tournaments were organized and carried out by regular players of all skill levels. Tournaments of this era were still mostly single elimination, and there were no cash prizes due to the gambling laws in Japan. This year was

a first for tournaments, though.

This time, players from across the country, especially the more well-known skilled players, paid transportation costs out of their own pockets to enter a



Nothing like paying out of your own pocket to travel halfway across the country to play a video game

tournament held in Kawasaki. There were photo and video records of this tournament for others, but this was quite surprising since there were no cash prizes, especially for the players way out in Hokkaido or the Kansai regions, for whom that was a huge expense to bear for a social gathering.

On that note, a number of the local players did start to gain recognition to DDR and music game fans outside of Japan. Most notable was the player "Brosoni" and to a lesser extent his immediate friends and rivals including but not limited to "RIN-GO" and "TAKASKE". During the DDR X era, Brosoni's small cell phone picture of an AAA (Perfect Full Combo) on Fascination Maxx turned a few heads, though only among a very small percentage of the overseas fan base that understood the significance of the accomplishment. Since then, he has made full HD videos available of his accomplishments. The videos were impressive and looked great. Brosoni was slightly aware of his popularity overseas, though he was still self-conscious about how to get in touch with them and more so how to communicate with them.

So at the end of 2010, the community lived on and the music game genre in general was still thriving, especially among the more regular players.



Even outside the circle of regular players, casual gamers enjoyed the varied kinds of Bemani music games, with Jubeat arguably being the most popular series. The newest mix at the time of the original draft of this work, DDR X2, was drawing a fair number of gamers (both casual and hardcore, scorers and performers) and there were events and content unlocks to keep the game fresh in addition to the player-run tournaments organized from time to time. The soundtrack for DDR X2 was released later in the year, and this helped tide gamers over until the next game in the series eventually arrived (DDR X3 vs. 2<sup>nd</sup> Mix).



# 2011



## **I'm Blue (La Dee Dee La Dee Dah)**

With 2011 underway, the most hardcore of the hardcore fans of the series continued to work on the hardest songs in the game, though they only made up a very small portion of the overall hardcore community which was in itself a small part of the fan base of the series as a whole.

Many players, however, did enjoy playing to the level of trying to take the eAmuse record for a song. This was something done by not only the hardcore crowd, but even just the regular (albeit non-expert) players. Even though players that were not the best of the best had no shot at the record for a very difficult song or chart, "Light" and "Difficult" (and even "Beginner") charts were commonly played as well for this purpose.

The almost-mythical "MFC" (Marvelous Full Combo – a full combo in which all of the step judgments were "Marvelous"; the maximum possible score in the game under the new grading system in place since SuperNOVA 2) was increasingly becoming a reality for more and more players (admittedly, only the

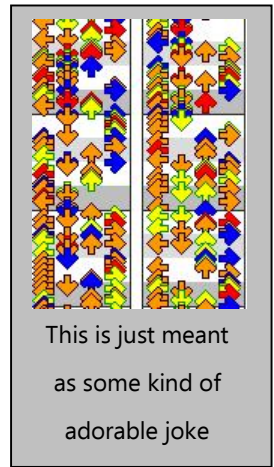
most dedicated). Although these accomplishments were still very rare, even a less-than-stellar player could still rarely pull one off on an easier song. This had even been accomplished by players of ages up to the mid 40s.

The hidden content was all available to players early on in the year. Although the more avid players already had most of the unlocked content through regular play and game "events", the final "unlock" that made all of the hidden content finally available to all players was always considered to signify the end of the life cycle of the game (in the series). Amusingly, there was a last-spat series of unlocks as part of a campaign with the other Konami music game series. However, the last two songs ("Theory of Eternity", "I'm So Happy") were never available on the overseas version of the game for whatever reason, technical or licensing..

Speaking of which, the overseas arcade version did appear in a few select arcades in the United States and Europe. The reaction to this mix overseas was little better than that of DDR X overall, though the harder charts seemed to appeal more so than the content offered in DDR X. The construction of the overseas cabinet was once again largely to blame,

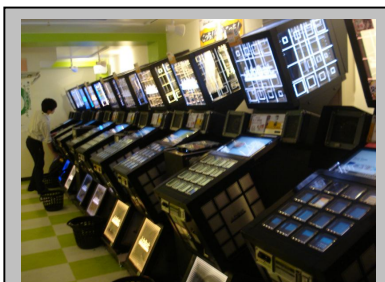
though there were music game fans from the Western communities that were firmly fans of the "In The Groove" series, and the more vocal of that community seemed to harshly criticize the game regardless of the content and features offered, as if they had already made up their mind that they wouldn't like it before even (or ever) trying it out.

Amusingly, there were a few small handfuls of players that made custom step content for DDR X2. Many charts were general, simple charts though there were some that were targeted at the more skilled players. There was even a particular series of step data noticed on a few machines titled to the effect "ITGSTYLE". Upon inspection, these charts mainly consisted of a constant stream of 16<sup>th</sup> note steps. (Or 8<sup>th</sup> depending on the BPM of the song) These types of incidents were very isolated, though this lended itself to the overall impression (and generalization) that the foreign series "In The Groove" tended to focus more on stamina and foot speed, thus lending itself to long streams of steps.



Regardless of whether or not the majority of step charts made for "In The Groove" focused more on stamina and foot speed, the impression that the Japanese received based on what was popular (e.g. Dragonforce) and the vocal elements of the Western community pushing it may have inadvertently cemented that opinion in the East. (And arguably the West outside of the United States as well)

By the time a few more months had passed, the casual gamers weren't really into DDR all that much, though many had found a new interest in other game series such as the immensely popular "Jubeat" series of music games. The hardcore crowd still played DDR though they too liked to play around with the different music game series.



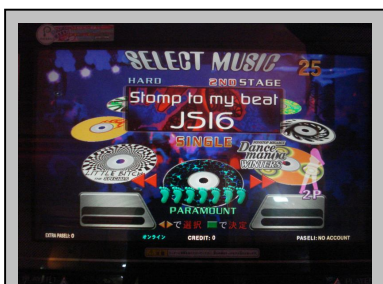
When some arcades have double digit numbers of Jubeat machines, it is safe to say someone must play it

The next in the series, "DDR X3 vs. 2<sup>nd</sup> Mix" was announced around the middle of the year though the title was not announced as such. The initial game banner showed "Dance Dance Revolution X3" but the

latter half was not revealed until later.

Although a new DDR mix was not surprising to the fans of the series considering the success of DDR X and DDR X2, the newly announced "2<sup>nd</sup> Mix" feature initially drew the most attention before the first test location version.

The announcement from Konami was that this 2<sup>nd</sup> Mix "mode" allowed players to relive the nostalgia of the 2<sup>nd</sup> mix era with enhanced graphics to take advantage of the High-Def display. Although this sounded



Just like old times, but it will take more than a dozen songs to keep the player's attention

amazing at first, the really nostalgic "key" mixes of that era were more so DDR 1<sup>st</sup> Mix and DDR 3<sup>rd</sup> Mix. However, since 2<sup>nd</sup> Mix had almost all of the content of 1<sup>st</sup> mix and then more, this became a moot point.

The test location version did arrive a few months later. The game itself as well as the players was under strict observation by Konami reps and arcade staff to try and ensure no footage or photos were leaked,

though some media surfaced regardless.

Around this time the "Konami Arcade Championships 2011" were held across Japan and almost all of Konami's most recent eAmuse supported arcade titles (not just music games) were featured. For the music games, players could enter the qualifying rounds by playing a set of songs during a set time frame at any arcade registered on the eAmuse network (which was pretty much all of the ones with any recent music or Konami game) during this time. Although the songs used for the qualifying rounds were not particularly difficult, competition was extremely fierce. The competition was so fierce that the top ranked players were bordering on full Marvelous combos for entire sets of songs on DDR.

In comparison, some of the relatively newer series like Jubeat and Reflec Beat had a number of ties. The timing windows were larger in general but more so than not this appeared to be another case of Konami underestimating the skill of the players. For Jubeat's second qualifier round, 8 players had a perfect score for all 3 songs for the assigned set of songs within the first hour of the qualifier event.

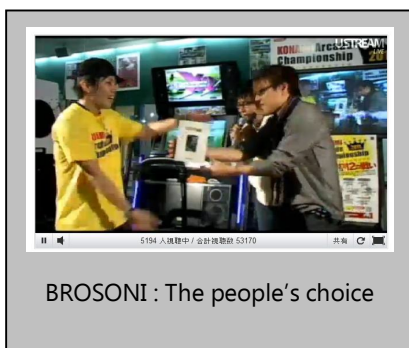
The semi-finals and finals for DDR were held on the same day, with the 5 finalists (one per region in Japan) left to battle it out at the end on songs of their choice chosen from a list provided by Konami. In an amusing twist, a handful of players were not even from Japan despite the initial rule that entrants must live in Japan. (Perhaps it was really only a suggestion) A couple of players (out of a few that qualified) from Taiwan flew over to Japan for the semi-finals. One player ("513") even became the Kanto region champion despite not living there.

Even though this may have stopped someone locally from getting to the finals, the Konami staff at the semi-finals (and subsequent finals) did not seem to mind, and even the other semi-finalists encouraged those abroad (that qualified) to come. However, even though this action may have set a controversial precedent about entrant rules on national tournaments and who can enter, the fact that players from different regions could compete together face-to-face was a positive event, and in the scope of the tournament it contributed towards a more exciting event overall.

The finals were broadcast over the public streaming web service "UStream" and covered all games used in

the championship. The songs were chosen by the players and consisted of the hardest songs in the game. Amusingly, these same charts tended to be despised in the West and written off as “terrible” charts with many problems. The Japanese players at this tournament didn’t mind these charts, though. In fact, they picked them on purpose out of their own volition.

The eventual winner, “BROSONI”, was a fan favorite to win from the start, though it was exciting to see such high level of play by all involved. Even in the West, the name



BROSONI was known to some, particularly the more hardcore dancing game fans. In Japan, BROSONI continued to remain a living legend of DDR. He may not have had many eAmuse records at all but the songs he could do very, very well were ones almost nobody else could touch.



Not long after the tournament had finished, DDR X3 machines started to slowly appear across Japan. The first machines to appear in November installed with DDR X3 were only available as dedicated cabinets purchased new from Konami. At the price of 2,000,000 yen per cabinet, it was an expensive premium to have to pay to have first dibs on the latest entry in the series.



Fortunately, upgrade kits for older cabinets were shipped by December and players were finally able to enjoy the most recent mix in the comfort of their favorite arcade(s).

The common feedback from the players tended to be that this newest mix was a lot of fun to play, though the overall difficulty did definitely seem easier on the whole compared to DDR X2. (For many fans though, this was not necessarily a bad thing) Additionally, the complaints about difficulties in general were that the songs and step charts rated the hardest should probably have been knocked down a rating or two, and those in the easier difficulty range should

probably have been bumped up a level or two.

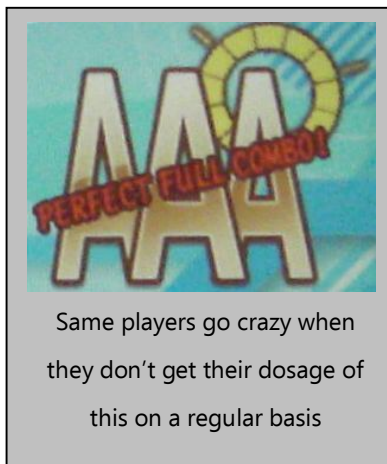
Initially, the list of new songs to the game was relatively short compared to other mixes though there were a number of songs unlocked through regular play as well as through other events that started in 2012.

The music in general was liked, or at the least there were no big complaints about the music used in the game. Western gamers tend to comment that there didn't seem to be a lot of "new" content since a number of the songs and step charts used in DDR X3 were taken from overseas home versions of the game not released in Japan, including DDR II for the Nintendo Wii and DDR (2010) for the PlayStation 3. Still, to the Japanese gamers this was all new content. Not many of the fans of the series in Japan, even the hardcore ones, knew much about overseas releases in general other than the existence of these titles. There were still surprises to be had for even the followers of the DDR series in the West however, as some songs had modified or completely different step charts, especially on double mode.

As mentioned previously, the difficulty of the songs overall was easier than those introduced in DDR X2.

The charts were fun, and even the ones rated lower in difficulty usually had a trick or two to keep the chart interesting, or at least to try and trip up the unsuspecting player aiming for an AAA (Perfect Full Combo) rank.

The issue for the expert players was that because the charts were easier on the whole, a number of players had all or almost all of the songs in the game AAA'd (PFC'd) rather quickly. True, the staggered



unlock system kept everyone playing, though for expert players not too many of the hidden songs and charts posed that much of a challenge.

Players enjoyed the satisfaction of AAAing (PFCing) an entire mix, however. By contrast, having a number of harder songs where AAAs were very difficult or only obtainable by the best of the best was almost seen as off-putting because the song selection screen proudly displays the player's scores, including the "blemishes" that mar a perfect streak. The expert

players were still completionists, ultimately. In fact, one common argument from gamers both local and abroad argued that any fan that played to such a level in hopes of perfecting everything in the game had to have at least a bit of OCD. (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder)

However, with an overall easier selection of songs and charts, casual players did tend to take to this mix, arguably more so than with DDR X2. Casual players enjoyed the licensed music and felt more at ease with this mix.



The BG video for "Memeshikute" was played a lot in "Attract" mode, even when asking to reboot the system

Furthermore, this mix inadvertently revealed that perhaps the communities of the West and East were still split on their opinions of shock arrows. While most shock arrow charts were tolerated and even very well liked in some cases, (the shock arrow charts for "Smoooch" and "Memeshikute" were, and still are, held in very high regard) the opinions from the West were predominantly negative.

By the end of the year, DDR X3 was still a relatively new mix so the game was still seeing its honeymoon phase. The music and charts were enjoyed, though the more hardcore players wondered what hidden content waited on the horizon.

As mentioned previously, DDR fans were also general music game fans, and skills tended to be transferable. With more events over the eAmuse network involving multiple music game series, players were encouraged to try other music games. Perhaps to not so much surprise, players adept at DDR or other music games tended to be able to achieve high scores on other music games after getting used to the different environment and system/game. DDR was a bit of a black sheep in some sense due to the physical factor involved in playing the game, though the premise was the same.

# Epilogue



## **Stomp to my Beat**

I realize that trying to give any kind of generalization on how an entire gaming subculture behaves is bound to be met by exceptions and regions where certain behaviors, attitudes, and mannerisms may differ from those written in this book. In fact, part of the reason for so many revisions of this book is due to the fact that each revision leads to me receiving mail about some small nuance or something that should have been worded differently.

My hope is that the general trends as noticed by myself and others with whom I am in close contact in this tight-knit community help give an indication as to where the general behaviors and mindsets over the years originate. Furthermore, I hope that this work helps illustrate the gradual changes and divergences between not only different groups of gamers within the local Japanese DDR subculture, but between them and overseas communities as well.

At the time of this original publication of this work in early 2011, the music game genre was still popular and the DDR series was carrying on as usual. Perhaps

DDR wasn't as ultra-popular as the phenomenon it was in the early years, but it was still doing well in comparison to a few periods of downtime during the history of the DDR series, and it fits in well with the other music games to continue to provide a unique arcade experience. The game and the players may not be in the foreground of mainstream popularity as was the case when the series were first released, but there are still casual and hardcore gamers alike that eagerly play and enjoy the game.

As mentioned (now several times) previously, in the modern day a DDR-only fan of the music game genre doesn't often exist. Players are music game fans first and foremost, and for some DDR is just their forte. In that sense, the music game genre still maintains a healthy base of fans both casual and hardcore to keep the genre going into the foreseeable future.

The DDR series had become a significant part of my life since the initial release in 1998, and with what I believe is a unique standpoint on the DDR "community" of the East and West, I wanted to express what my friends within the community and I had experienced (and can convey) over the years. This work is not only for my own recollection and memories, but for others with an interest in the game

and the players behind it. Differing viewpoints and opinions within the community and between the East and West over this series made for many interesting stories, and I hope that you found it as interesting to read as I found it to write.



# Addendum



## **The East and West: Parallel or Perpendicular?**

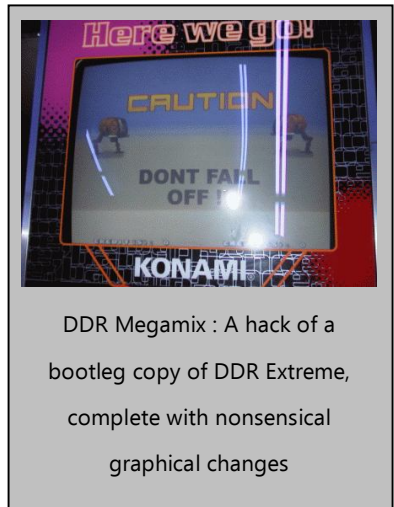
During the several updates and rewrites to this work, I had received a number of questions from others in addition to questions I raised myself during the creation of this work such as “What did/do players in Japan think of the American scene?”, “What ever happened to so-and-so?” and so on. In this last section I would like to address a few of these issues.

However, I must warn that this Chapter deals with a lot of the nitty-gritty details and nuances I felt had no place earlier in this work, and although I may get down to the technicalities at times, the ones I have mentioned are key (I believe) to help explain and understand at least some of the attitudes, mindsets and differences between the Eastern and Western gamers and fans of the DDR series. I may write in a more personal tone though the attitudes expressed are not only my own nor necessarily my own in some cases. For some, perhaps this Chapter is the most interesting part of the book.

First off, I am glad to have played even some small part in bringing together some of the fans and players of the series over the years. The ones I have met personally have all been great and the locals here were always thrilled to have special visitors. Although I regret not being able to visit more fans when going abroad (not that I got to do that much, anyways) the ones I have met abroad have also been great. In fact, some of the ones I first met are ones with whom I still keep in contact today.

During the olden days of DDR, up to when DDR Extreme was well established, the Western and Eastern fan base had a common platform to act as a basis for discussion as well as sharing accomplishments, opinions and questions. (Either about the game or the players abroad) After DDR Extreme became very stale, the series "In The Groove" emerged in the West, though not in the East. Conversely, DDR SuperNOVA emerged in the East followed soon after by a release in the West, though the interest in DDR in the West waned as the effort put into each subsequent overseas release seemed to diminish with each successive entry in the series. DDR Extreme was always popular, though, and some fans of DDR abroad even went so far as to try and customize the game content through manipulation

of the game data on the disc, despite the fact the only content in the end that could be changed was the inclusion of some visual and speed modifiers during game play normally hidden in "oni" mode, pre-loaded custom step chart data to supplement the default step charts and some image changes. There were even bootleg versions of



DDR Megamix : A hack of a bootleg copy of DDR Extreme, complete with nonsensical graphical changes

DDR Extreme abroad which was humorous since the copy of DDR Extreme used abroad was in itself a bootleg. There was another lesser-known hack dubbed the "Neocronic" patch which also tampered with the timing window sizes in some iterations, though fortunately this never reached the hands of more than a few very dedicated players that happened to have their own machine so this never really became a problem in terms of accomplishments claimed with widened timing windows, and video proof of any suspicious accomplishments were usually in order anyways..

On to the game series, one point I made earlier

about the survival of game series in general was clarified back to me in the form:

*Regardless of how hardcore the "hardcore" fan base of a game series is, it cannot survive without a steady influx of newcomers*

I had seen first hand some of the hardcore crowd discouraging newcomers and stagnating a series (for a while) with Beatmania IIDX, and it still does seem discouraging to perceive this behavior within the overseas fan bases of certain game series as well. Demonizing the newcomers only hastens the demise of a series and secludes it to a select handful of hardcore fans.

A noticeable behavior of the Western scene, primarily the American scene pertaining to the series "In The Groove", (as perceived by those abroad) was that instead of encouraging and welcoming newcomers into the fold, the fans of the various music game series seemed to fall into a kind of pit of self-loathing and shun outsiders, all the while bemoaning how "dead" the scene had become. The perception was that unless a player or step chart creator was one of the "in-crowd", he (or she) was not generally treated with the same level of courtesy as someone from

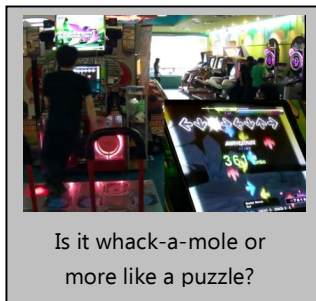
within the group.

However, on the other extreme there is the Western DDR community. In the West, the primary platform for the series is the home console. It was (and still is) marketed more towards the younger crowds, with the casual gamers vastly outnumbering the more "hardcore" players. Those players that wanted to seek out a DDR "arcade experience" were limited to bootleg copies of DDR Extreme (or bootlegs of bootlegs) on partially-working hardware or to seek out "In The Groove" or "Pump It Up" machines, which may have been only marginally easier to find. As such, the community that formed from this was predominantly online. Also as a consequence of there being a relatively high ratio of newcomers to hardcore players, some players were (and still are to a degree) oblivious to exactly what kinds of high level play or skill could be achieved.

Back to the more hardcore-dominated groups, even in cases where there was some "encouragement" to join the ranks of the "elite", it appeared to derive from the unmitigated hate of everything else not perceived to be "good" or "acceptable" to the hardcore crowd. The seemingly relentless bashing of the DDR series was so prevalent by the most vocal of

some groups in the West that it arguably overshadowed any merits and points about the series that they liked that might have drawn in newcomers to their fold. I cannot state enough that the bashing was over-the-top in terms of accusations and criticism. There was blame of the artists and musicians associated with Konami for the acts of Konami's legal division, and the automatic assumption that everything non-Konami was superior in every way (and conversely, everything by Konami was inferior by nature) were some of the more prominent examples of this.

On a related note, although I had mentioned it previously, the Western idea of what made a fun/good chart or challenge (and in a broader sense, what makes for a fun/good music game) differed quite a bit from the mindset in Japan. Whereas the Japanese players seemed to treat each step chart like a puzzle in that sometimes non-intuitive planning, foot placement, etc. was required to perfect it, the Western audience seemed to shun such "gimmicks" (as it was stated) in favor of charts that lacked these elements and were sometimes more



geared towards foot speed and stamina. On the other hand, the Japanese players (in general, there are some notable exceptions) were not such fans of long, stamina draining charts. With Konami focusing on the Asian market, the charts and songs they used appealed to their intended audience, but alienated the overseas crowds. There were also other issues with the build quality of the overseas machines that ruined the experience, but that was more of a hardware issue than any subjective opinion of the players.

In terms of the overall game experience, one notable difference was the enjoyment of the tighter timing windows in more recent releases of DDR. (The “Marvelous” timing window to be specific)

Although Western gamers, particularly fans of rival music games, accustomed to longer songs/charts with significantly more steps would occasionally pipe up in YouTube comments on DDR videos with the likes of “Where’s the challenge?” or “When does it get hard?”, the



<b>MARVELOUS!!</b>	16.6667ms
<b>FANTASTIC!</b>	21.5ms
<b>PERFECT!!</b>	33.3334ms
<b>EXCELLENT</b>	43ms

Some timing windows from DDR and ITG. Note that these are just approximate values since DDR measures windows in frames and ITG measures in milliseconds

challenge was different.

Traditionally, the timing window for the "Perfect" judgment was the smallest in the original games of the DDR series. With the release of "In The Groove", the tightest timing window available became the "Fantastic" judgment. In later mixes of DDR, the "Marvelous" judgment became the tightest/smallest timing window.

The task of performing a chart/song to complete and utter perfection remains a popular pastime with the Japanese gamers, and this almost obsessive behavior was not limited to the music game genre, either. Within the scope of DDR, there exists a significant number of players that only play Light/Easy modes and aim for as close to complete perfection as they can. The challenge with this came from the fact that the "Marvelous" timing window was so small that regardless of how much dedicated practice and patience someone put into the song, a full "Marvelous" combo was still a difficult and rare event, even among the best players of the game and on the most straightforward of songs.

Of course, this led to a fairly common claim that the reason songs on DDR were so hard to MFC (A full



“Marvelous” combo) was due to the “awful” syncing of the songs with the step charts. The locals seemed to be able to pull it off whereas this still remains almost unheard of in the West. As was mentioned earlier in this work, the construction quality of the arcade stages overseas left a lot to be desired, and that made for a poorer experience.

Furthermore, if the songs and charts in general were truly so badly synced, how could there still have been so many all-Marvelous scores performed, even on Expert level songs? Also, how could this have been done with a timing window smaller than anything found in other music games of the same genre? If the timing windows were more comparable to other

games, one could argue that a player could purposely compromise their own judgment and attune himself to the judgment for a specific song, but this wasn't the case with a certain song or a certain player, this covered most of the songs in



Yes, it really was possible.

the game by an entire region of the world. This isn't to say all songs were perfectly synced, because they were not, and there have been some notable

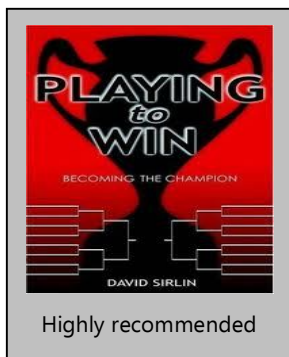
exceptions over the years, but by and large the local Japanese players were fine with the syncing, especially in regards to recent arcade versions, and the record scores are a testament to that.

The challenge for a series like "In The Groove", as it was perceived by the Eastern community, was that step charts tended to just be longer and have more steps. (And were arguably faster on average) Don't get me wrong; To the hardcore fans of the DDR series in Japan, some of them did, and still do, enjoy watching the occasional video of what was happening overseas, (and sometimes lamenting their inability to communicate in English) but in general it was seen as the two sides of the argument between "The Western Experience" and "The Eastern Experience", complete with biased falsehoods and arrogance on both sides.

Over the years, some of the more pronounced (negative) opinions from the West have been along the lines of "Everything in DDR is easy" or "I'll play a game that requires skill" yet "All DDR songs are off-sync", "all DDR step charts are terrible", "ew, crossovers/BPM changes" and the list goes on. Conversely, from the East there were a few similarly arrogant statements to the effect "YJR" is substituted

for "In The Groove" (YYR = Yankee Yankee Revolution) and "ITG Style" step charts simply mean a nonstop 8<sup>th</sup> or 16<sup>th</sup> note stream of steps from the beginning to the end of a song. Granted, part of the reason for this opinion was based on the observation that the more popular step charts made for ITG tended to test this skill set more so than others, sometimes to the point it was viewed as "overdone".

In fact, I would go so far to cite the book on gaming strategy "Playing To Win" (by David Sirlin) and a few facets of the definition the author uses to describe a "scrub" in the sense:



*"A scrub is a player who is handicapped by self-imposed rules that the game knows nothing about. The scrub is bound up by an intricate construct of fictitious rules that prevents him from ever truly competing. These made-up rules vary from scrub to scrub, of course, but their character remains constant. The scrub is only willing to play to win within his own made-up mental set of rules."*

In context, the problem wasn't that certain elements

of gameplay weren't really utilized in certain game series; it was the attitude that anything lying outside of the player's predefined skill set was "cheap" or a "gimmick" and the player refused to learn skills or other ways to cope with the new situations.

Despite arrogant claims, without experience on multiple series of games, one will not simply fly over to the other side of the world and dominate everyone there at their own game. For that matter, the "game" had changed anyways. Much in the same way almost no Japanese players were aware of what current step charts/songs were "hot" in the West, relatively few music game fans from the West were aware of what had happened with the DDR series since DDR Extreme came out in 2002. Furthermore, it was total arrogance to assume that nothing had changed with either series a decade later.

This arrogance carried over to the custom content creators to a significant degree, and the attitudes remained pretty consistent across the board. There were common complaints over certain play styles and patterns in step charts in DDR that annoyed certain players in the West. However, instead of developing another solution to a new pattern or working at it to get better, there was a perceived

attitude that it should just have been declared “cheap” or “gimmicky” and abandoned. Instead of developing new skills or broadening their horizons, they were narrowing their own scope of the game and what they defined as “skill” despite the fact no such boundary existed except in the mental prison they had created for themselves.

This is not to say the Eastern players didn’t have their own faults. In general, the mass appeal of DDR and the contained step charts was not one that includes extremely long or fast patterns of steps (with some exceptions). Such songs were never often picked except at lower difficulties. Also, on a more social level, there were a number of less-than-expert players that were easily intimidated by players of higher skill. It was not completely uncommon for one of them to see someone playing at a higher level of skill and become intimidated enough to leave the arcade, only to come back later in hopes that the one(s) playing had since returned home.



The AAA! It burns!

Over the years, especially in recent times (relative to the publication of this book), there had been somewhat of a backlash against the DDR series overseas. Some of it was personal preference to the kind of challenges the games offered as well as just availability of the DDR titles. (Increasingly rare outside of Asia) However, from the point of view of someone living in Asia, quite a bit of the bashing did seem unmitigated, and frankly, that “vocal minority” did cast a very negative image over the music game fans of the West. Even more unfortunately that negative attitude sometimes overshadowed the custom work content created by those overseas.

After dealing with the Japanese, American and European communities, I understood that some people tend to be more of a jerk online than in real life, (they wouldn't act in real life they way they did online) but I found it a curious phenomenon that once

someone painted themselves as a jerk online, their work or opinions were automatically nulled and

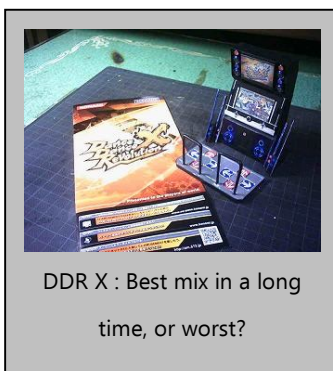


voided from that point on to some crowds. I had seen comments to the like "Oh, so-and-so is a jerk but he makes fun step charts so he's all cool" from the West whereas the same content would be ignored by those elsewhere, written off to the fact they don't want anything to do with such a "jerk". Trying to convey "Oh, so-and-so is a jerk online but they are cool in real life" was met with "If they are such a nice person in real life, why do they choose to be a jerk online?" There were always exceptions, of course, but I was just noting something that had happened a few too many times to be just a coincidence in my opinion. At one point, this sort of behavior was sometimes referred to online as a type of "Americanism". There were similar types of users from all over the world; it just seemed that, for whatever reason, the more vocal ones online tended to be American.

This divergence of tastes started to become noticeable to me around the SuperNOVA/SuperNOVA 2 mixes onwards. With SuperNOVA 2, there were some considerably harder charts in the game, but whereas the overseas crowds that weren't that fond of SuperNOVA 1 thought SuperNOVA 2 was a step in the right direction at least, the Japanese crowd almost had the opposite

stance, with the hardest songs and charts not even being played by most of the gamers. (Except on perhaps the lower difficulty settings) Both sides seemed to have the opinion that the licensed songs were somewhat lacking, though.

Furthermore, although DDR X and DDR X2 (to a similar or slightly lesser degree) were relatively huge successes in Japan compared to some of the previous entries in the series, the American and European releases saw poor build construction and lack of eAmuse support for events, unlocks, personal progress tracking, rival



score tracking, national score records, etc. Also, general taste differences in music and charts led to a generally poor reception of both mixes overseas. The contrast of opinions on the series since DDR X comes off as black and white between Japan and the rest of the world overseas in some cases. One could take a look at a chart with lots of "crossovers" and "double steps" and bet that Japanese players would just deal with it (or enjoy it), but by the same token there was sure to be cries of "unfun" and "gimmicky" from the



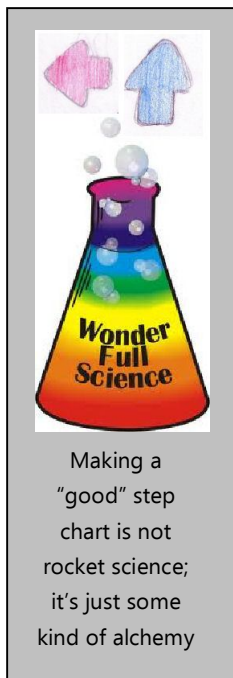
overseas crowd. Amusingly, the stances were reversed when talking about extremely fast and/or hard charts where stamina was a large factor in passing a song let alone doing well on it. These are some extreme examples and there are exceptions, but these are only meant to illustrate the contrast of opinions.

To expand the scope to include custom/user created step charts, the entire scene and how the custom content was viewed seemed different as well. Step charts for use on a DDR machine in Japan were generally made for one of three reasons: for freestyle performance use, for a select group of friends/local arcade goers, and ones created by seasoned or experienced players and made into a series of "lesson" step charts gradually building in difficulty.

There weren't usually mass collections of all these edits online, and instead custom step charts were stored and shared on arcade machines and over the eAmuse network. (With some players uploading data files on their personal blog) There were occasional Japanese group releases of simfiles for use with Stepmania, however. As a bonus, the designers sometimes made up entire websites devoted to the promotion and explanation of the simfile pack and comments from the artists and musicians (since the

content in a fair number of these packs were comprised completely of original content). All the same, such releases were not so common.

The view from Japan on the overseas existence of entire communities devoted to custom step charts (particularly the custom songs and charts used in the "In The Groove" series) was a mix of awe and confusion. Many that couldn't understand English well at all may only have been interested in the custom simfiles, but when they looked at/translated the comments and opinions on these simfiles, the locals thought it was great that such things existed, but since what constituted a "good" song or chart was subjective (barring technical issues or errors), it came off as a bit arrogant for these creators from overseas to dictate that "This chart/song is bad because I said so", or implying something is bad stating their own opinions in an authoritative way as if it were an objective issue instead of a subjective one, sometimes referred to by a loose set of guidelines using terms like "step rhetoric" or



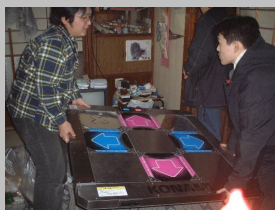
“Stepmania Science”. This judging of subjective content as if it were objective is done as opposed to simply stating something like “I don’t like this chart/song because...”

One of the big problems with strictly following a guide like this is that it assumes that someone that was creating a simfile knew absolutely nothing about the game and needed help at every step of the way, as if they had no imagination or creativity from which to start. This molds their work into what the creators of these same guidelines like personally. Although there is no one “right” way of creating a simfile, not everything that does not follow a strict standard or guide is “wrong”. Experimentation and trial-and-error are not bad things, but based on the way that the most vocal of the community tend to demonize those that stray from the “standard”, such experimentation is almost discouraged, essentially. One comment I received on the social networking site Mixi illustrated a response to an extreme degree of this (translated):

*"Wait, so this person makes custom step charts and not only does he demand his own work be praised like it were perfection, he says other's work is 'stupid' just because it isn't something he would do, encourages others to also demean any work that doesn't appeal to his own personal ideas of quality, and then he expects to be \*respected\* for this stance?"*

This wasn't the view on everyone, granted, but these kinds of attitudes stuck out the most. (By the vocal minority) To be fair, a number of the local Japanese players did enjoy taking a peek at what was considered popular in the custom simfile community on their PCs with Stepmania, though tastes did vary as I had mentioned numerous times already.

In terms of arcade vs. home console gaming habits, there are some significant differences between the Eastern DDR community and the modern Western DDR community. At this time, the music game genre is primarily an arcade phenomenon in the East



You could play on the arcade style home controller, but I'm sure \$2000 US could be better spent elsewhere

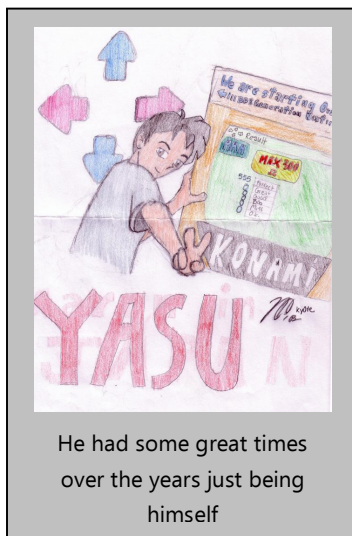
(with the exception of a few entries on mobile gaming platforms) whereas in the West the music game genre is primarily seated on the home console. This is not to say that there is no relation at all. In fact, with the focus for the home console versions being so tailored to a more family or casual oriented crowd it echoes the way the DDR series started back in Japan in 1998 with the exception that this is now a home experience as opposed to something for the arcades. I would have thought it would almost be considered nostalgic and although the modern home console versions do have nice production values and various polishes to the interface/experience, it does seem hard to relate without it being an arcade experience.

Conversely, the DDR series has continued on as an arcade-only experience in Japan, (and Asia for that matter) whereas the West got lackluster support and releases, when there were any at all. Although it is perfectly understandable for frustration and anger to pervade the North American DDR fan base (former DDR fan base, arguably), it is sad that there doesn't seem to be a common platform for discussion and debate anymore on that front.

As for the "Where are they now?" question I

sometimes get regarding the brothers Take and Yasu, I still keep in touch with them. Although both are still gamers, there are other things in their lives now including work and family (a number of the more hardcore music game fans of old have been getting married and starting families in recent times) and they simply can't afford to put in the ridiculously long hours they used to at these games, especially the all-nighter and all-weekend binges they used to do. Of course, that doesn't mean they don't stop for a few games on the way home from work.

Yasu still plays DDR once in a while, he can still score an AAA on MAX 300 and yes, he has AAA'd it at least several hundred times now. I keep getting a different answer every time I ask him, but I have seen him personally AAA it about 100 or so times and know he has done it over 300 times since that



was directly related to the collaboration with DDRUK and the shirt he received to wear on his 300<sup>th</sup> AAA on the song over 6 years ago now. His brother doesn't

play DDR much at all anymore but he is still into other music games like Beatmania IIDX. Another friend (Akudaikan) that recorded a lot of the oldest DDR photos and videos from here still plays. He may be approaching his mid-40s at the time of this writing but he still plays on the easier difficulties (including some of the easier Expert-level songs) and can still AAA them and even get full Marvelous combos (MFC) on some easier songs. He also films random freestyle performances and hosts them on YouTube these days in addition to hosting his infamous dinner meet-ups from time to time.

In terms of other media, I have been contacted at times to act as a kind of foreign Japanese arcade/rhythm game expert for various print and other media over the years. In fact, this whole book is a personal project inspired by the fact that I would never get to go into this much depth in someone else's more general Japanese arcade/game report or project.

Some of the longer time Japanese DDR community personalities (for lack of a better word) such as Pre-san, Yosaku and LWorld are still making their reports and updates on events and news, even if the content/players that are the subject of focus change

over the years.

The Japanese DDR community still has visitors from overseas once in a while and we do our best to try and meet up if we can. If one thing, we are pleased to be able to make acquaintances and even friendships with fans and players over the years that hold up to this day, so I must extend a big thanks to all the fans for that.



# Glossary



**AAA** – The letter grade representing the highest possible score for a single song, consisting of all Perfect steps. In later mixes, an AAA alone is defined to be  $\geq 99\%$  of the maximum score. Also in the later mixes, PFC and MFC are used to denote what would be considered a traditional “AAA”. **AAA** and **AAAd** are also colloquialisms meaning “to achieve a score rank of AAA”.

**Battle Mode** – A game mode of the DDR SuperNOVA/NOVA2 / X series in which players could choose to play a player vs. player or player vs. CPU match on a per-song basis in a best-of-three match. Random visual modifiers were applied based on how well the opponent was doing

**Beatmania** – Konami’s first game entry in the Bemani music game series. A game consisting of a turntable and 5 keys the player uses as input to reproduce a displayed pattern in time with music.

**Bemani** – Konami’s line of music and rhythm games.

**Boss song** – Any song notably more difficult or challenging than the others in the game. Sometimes limited to the final or extra stages of a game.

**BPM** – Beats Per Minute. In the context of this work, the speed of a song at any specific point.

**DDR** – Dance Dance Revolution, a popular Bemani music game series by Konami.

**Difficulty** – Over the years, the terminology of the difficulty settings used in DDR has changed. This is a guideline to those difficulty names and their transitions. The difficulty chart on the following page is listed in order of increasing difficulty from top to bottom with the horizontal scale representing the progression of the DDR series timeline.

-	→	Beginner	→	Beginner
Basic	→	Light	→	Basic
Another / Trick	→	Standard	→	Difficult
Maniac / SSR	→	Heavy	→	Expert
*(S-Maniac)	→	Oni	→	Challenge

\* The S-Maniac (Super Maniac) difficulty was used in DDR 4<sup>th</sup>+ for new, harder step charts to older songs carried over from previous mixes.

**eAmuse** – Konami’s proprietary network used to link arcade machines to keep track of player scores, record/show high scores and unlock new content.

**Edit Data** – Custom user-created step chart data for use on either the home console versions of DDR or the arcade. Usually created by Konami's own home console versions in "Edit Mode" and exported to external media for use in the arcade version. Related to **Step chart**.

**Footer** – A suffix used to identify the difficulty of a song in DDR on a scale from 1 to 10 prior to the introduction of the X-Scale difficulty rating used from DDR X onward.

**GREAT (Judgment)** – Refers to the step judgment one below "Perfect". Getting even one of these makes it impossible to achieve a grade of "AAA" on a song in older mixes prior to DDR SuperNOVA 2.

**Groove Radar** – A graph used from DDR MAX onward that indicates the difficulty of a step chart based on 5 elements: **Stream, Voltage, Air, Freeze, Chaos**. (See pages 48-49 for details) Another similar chart is used to display the player's personal strengths and weaknesses in relation to these 5 elements in later DDR mixes. Refer to **My Groove Radar**.

**In The Groove** – (a.k.a. ITG) Another 4-panel dancing simulation game originally created by the American company Roxor. Relatively popular outside Japan. Some revisions allow for full customization of the system and content. Loosely related to **Stepmania**

**IR** – Internet Ranking, a limited time event during which players compete for the highest scores on designated songs and courses (preset series of songs)

**MARVELOUS (Judgment)** – Also called “Marvellous”. In later mixes of DDR, the highest single judgment grade per step. This superseded the “Perfect” judgment.

**MFC** – Marvelous Full Combo. The maximum possible score for a single song, achieved by a full combo of all Marvelous steps. Refer to **AAA**

**My Groove Radar** – A player’s personal skill and accomplishment record shown in the style of the DDR “Groove Radar” indicating strengths and weaknesses in relation to the 5 skills highlighted on the standard Groove Radar. Refer to **Groove Radar**.

**PASELI** – A prepaid system by which players can assign prepaid funds to their eAmuse account and play designated games that support the PASELI system without the need to carry money.

**PERFECT (Judgment)** – Until later mixes of DDR, the highest single judgment grade per step. This was superseded by the “Marvelous/Marvellous” judgment.

**PFC** – Perfect Full Combo. A score for a single song consisting of all Perfect or Marvelous steps (though not all Marvelous, or MFC). Refer to **AAA**

**Simfile** – A custom user created work consisting of a step chart for an existing song or in the case of Stepmania or In The Groove, a combination of step chart, music and related artwork. See **Step chart** and **Edit Data**.

**Step chart** – A set pattern of steps to a song displayed as arrows to the player. Step charts can also be custom made for arcade play and home use. Also spelled as “stepchart”. Related to **Edit Data**.

**Stepmania** – A PC simulator based on DDR that allows for customized songs, step charts and other components of the game.

**X-Scale** – The difficulty rating system used from DDR X onward. Songs and charts are rated on a difficulty scale from 1 to a theoretical maximum of 20.

**X-Special** – Special step charts in DDR X made for songs revived from older DDR mixes. These songs are “Challenge” difficulty only.

## Special Thanks



I would like to thank a number of users for their input and ideas over the course of the creation of this work.

First, I would like to thank all of my DDR acquaintances over the past 13 years, both in Japan and abroad, for their invaluable input.

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Within Japan I would like to acknowledge the input from players, both regular and casual, from whom I was able to understand and state (some of, at least) the trends of the time.