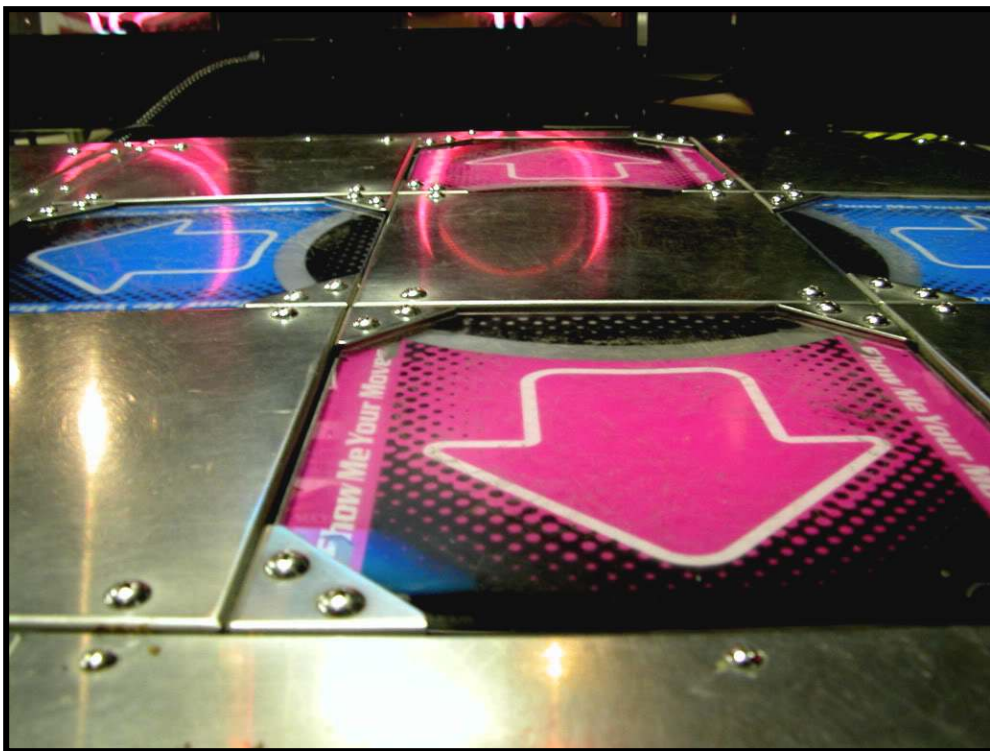


# Combo's Continuing

## The History of the Japanese DDR Community



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Revision 41

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# About the Author

Since there is a chance those of you reading this may not have any idea about who the author is and his background on this subject matter, especially if you find this years after I have written it, I'll provide a brief synopsis here.

I, Aaron Chmielowiec, 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, but I would quickly take to the game and get hooked right up to the modern day (at the time of this original draft, January 2011).

Over the years, I would get in touch with the local DDR players as well as search out any interest overseas. I have been viewed as a conduit between the two communities at times, and had a unique stance between them.

For better or worse, I am also responsible as a catalyst for starting the whole "Take a photo/video of your DDR scores" as a means of personal record as well as proof. Due to the close proximity of a few expert players, I was also able to use photo and video media to



Left to Right: Me, Yasu, Take

show the (at the time) high level play of the players Yasu and his brother Take (and others). Although the responses overseas were mixed and varied, I would be associated with their recognition both local to Japan and overseas (and would also

live in their shadow as a DDR player). I would also share information I discovered, figured out, or translated like the complete scoring system info. and small things like recording the original Pop'n Music Freestyle Videos and finding the song "Max Period" in the home version of DDR Extreme two days before the official release, but I would never really be known for that.

I had set up a website for my DDR experiences and ramblings as early as 1999, though it wouldn't include a proper forum interface for a few years (I was using Usenet newsgroups back then in the beginning). Players over the years would come and go, but I was always in contact with the local players as well as reaching out overseas and got to witness the changes in attitude and players as well as the music game genre itself.

I chose to write this because I felt that especially in later years when many of the newcomers had such radically different stances and opinions compared to the Japanese community, and it might be useful to understand how those differences came about and how the communities progressed and changed from what they were to what they are now.

Please understand that I am not much of a writer and although I will do what I can to make it somewhat legible with proper spelling, grammar and a glossary, I hope you can forgive any nuances in English for sake of the content within.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Sharon Christine". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style, with the first name "Sharon" on the top line and the last name "Christine" on the bottom line, slightly overlapping.

# 1998

From the arcade expo earlier in the year, the fans of the first Beatmania game were describing it as "Beatmania for your feet". There was not much else to say at that time, 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. I was playing at the end of October and a friend of mine, Akudaikan, was playing in September. The original machine did come out in September, but the definitive version "1.5" or "Internet Ranking Version" that added 2 more songs ("Make It Better" and "Trip Machine" for the interested) was officially released November 21, 1998. So when Konami celebrates the birthday of DDR, they are actually celebrating the "1.5" mix. On a side note, neither the 1st mix nor the 1.5 mix have the song "Money" on them. 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 2nd and 3rd mixes respectively at the test location phase.

Along with the release of the first in the Pop'n Music series in September as well as the then-popular Beatmania, the music game craze continued to hold

as DDR quickly became a hit despite the very short song list. "Butterfly" (by smile .dk) was by far the most overplayed song on it and became synonymous with the game itself to the casual passerby.

Lines were long, machines were absolutely everywhere, even in places that shouldn't normally have 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



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

charging ridiculous prices like 200 yen for 2 songs (or 1 song on double). Granted, some locations had their machines outside the store itself (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 would host the whole tournament outside the arcade. At the peak of the tournament, Konami estimated from their gallery photos that 250 people were watching at any one time.

Also, before the time 2nd mix would come out, passing the song "Paranoia" on Maniac mode was considered a status symbol among gamers. It was very reminiscent of how gamers in the early/mid 80s viewed someone finishing "Dragon's Lair". In retrospect, a new player to DDR may not find

Paranoia as difficult as it was viewed back then, especially in comparison to the new charts that can be seen in later mixes of the game. However, 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 would throw people off.

On the topic of play styles, there were two distinctive play styles 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 was where the player would step on the Left arrow with their left foot and the Up, Right, Down arrows with their right foot. The Kansai step was where the player would step on an arrow but then quickly shift their body to return to the middle of the stage.

There were big fans of the game, but even though there were a few tournaments, there weren't real DDR "groups" at the time; more like arcade groups of friends that also liked this new



DDR thing. Konami did have a social site for DDR fans at the time, though it was very minimal, nothing like the other fan sites and DDROnline that would pop up as years went by.



Already getting ready for the second iteration in the series

# 1999

1999 was a busy year. Just as gamers thought DDR was a one time novelty game, 2nd mix came out at the end of January, riding on the mass popularity of the game. Additionally, other music games such as Guitar Freaks and Drummania would come out to help propel the music game genre. 3rd mix would also come out in that same year and propel the phenomenon even further with double the song count. The first Beatmania IIDX also came out and drew its own dedicated crowd as well. The transition from 5 key to 7 key blew many player's minds, though.

Due 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



Club Velfarre in Roppongi at its popularity peak

Roppongi was at its 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 a specific group 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; it was only ever really seen as a novelty for the time. The arrows were a little bit harder to read, though the largest problem was that DDR was a social

platform at this time (and the SOLO series was 1-player only). 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 would die out in favour of the main series on the classic machine design.

One thing that also thrived during this time was the entire player community. There were DDR "teams", usually around half a dozen to a dozen (sometimes more) that would get together for semi-regular arcade sessions and then something afterwards like a big dinner outing or event.



Dancing Stage feat. Dreams Come True.

One of the many offshoots in the series

The DDR teams were just as much a social gathering platform as it was a group of friends that liked to play games. Skill was not really a determinant at this time for the teams, and most of the time they were 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 you could be admitted into their group. One such example is "Team CPC" (Club Pink Cocktail) from Kagoshima, which had the following 4 rules before you could be admitted.

1. Must be a fan and reader of the magazine "Fantasy Cocktail" (a cocktail/recipe/fan magazine)
2. Must like Dance Dance Revolution and want to improve
3. Must not be a disturbance to others
4. Can clear "Have You Never Been Mellow" (Normal difficulty) on their own

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 would find this amusing and even so far as to say a spectacle, the widespread reach and popularity of the groups and their subsequent performances would start to wear thin with the average passer-by. However, within the teams themselves, everyone was having a great time. It was like the party could

never end.

The home version of DDR for the Playstation came out this year as well, but even though it sold moderately well, it was clear that the phenomenon was more for the arcade experience than at home. The home version did introduce one amusing gameplay twist however, the introduction of the “Ouch!” Judgment in Arrange Mode. In this mode, players would be punished by a reduced life bar for stepping where there were no arrows. It was possible to fail 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.



A brief venture into mixing Karaoke and DDR.

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 although people paid for the karaoke service/room on a per

hour/half-hour basis, the DAM-DDR system was an additional 200 yen per play at the time (or however much the karaoke plaza felt like charging), making it extremely expensive for anyone that might have wanted to take it seriously. There would be a “2<sup>nd</sup>” mix of this system that increased the song count to 20,000 as well. Although now extremely rare, some machines do exist to date at a few of the “Big Echo” karaoke plazas.

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



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

tournament. This was a major tournament with sponsors including Toshiba Emi, Intercord Japan, Japan Airlines, Japan Travel Bureau, Pioneer and Puma to promote awareness of DDR. The winners received round trip tickets to Okinawa and various autographed memorabilia. Captain Jack (song artist) made a public appearance and also announced some of the music coming up in the next release of DDR

# 2000

As the year starts off on a high, 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 the games for entire days/holidays/weekends at a time. Many of the music gamers of the day will 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, and Konami's own Circo Porto arcades had just about them all (and multiple machines to boot) 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, DDR 3rd+, 4th and 4th+ would be released. One thing interesting to note is that 3rd+ introduced a number of Korean songs (7 in total) into the mix from the Asian mix "DDR 3rd Mix Korean Version" which was originally based on DDR 3rd Mix (confused yet?). This was believed to be partly due to the Japan/Korea friendship event going on that year. Also of note is that the mixes known as "3rd Mix Korean Version" and "3rd Mix Ver. Korea 2" are actually Asian mixes for outside of Japan; you

would not have found those mixes in a Japanese arcade.

Also this year, DDR 4<sup>th</sup> mix would be the first to do away with the classic song selection interface (the CD selection wheel) in favour of song title banners being used to indicate and select songs. It would also break up the available



Preliminary drafts of the song selection screen for DDR 4<sup>th</sup> mix

songs into “categories” from which the player would choose when they first start their game. In theory this was nice, but in practice it limited the player to picking songs from one category per game. This would be rectified with an “All Music” option in the later 4<sup>th</sup>+ 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 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, they were seen as a bit too intimidating for some players and they didn’t get nearly as much play time as other charts/songs in the game anyways. Perhaps it was just too soon for that kind of a jump in difficulty.

However, it is also during this time that the whole Para Para dancing craze starting to fade out from mainstream popularity (though the scene itself

would still continue for another couple of years). This left the Para Para Paradise series in a bit of an awkward position, and although that didn't affect DDR players directly, the fading of the popularity of Para Para also influenced the fading in popularity of Eurobeat and Dance/Techno music from the mainstream focus, though the Dancemania series of CDs (including the Dancemania BASS Mix series) would still remain popular items. This point would play an important role in later mixes of DDR and the music games in general.

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

Firstly, although Konami had a few sponsored events with earlier mixes that were a combination of skill and performance ability, the shift in their own tournaments/rankings went online to a purely score-based ranking. 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 either just became circles of friends (which in a sense they always were) or general gaming clubs (or even general music game clubs).

Secondly, with the shift more towards score, this would be the initial rise of the scorer. Up until that point, players for the most part couldn't really

care less about maximizing their score to the point of all Perfects (some exceptions, of course) even though their own personal aim was to maximize their score as best they could do. Around this time various fan made scoring sites and places where scores and records could be discussed emerged. It 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.

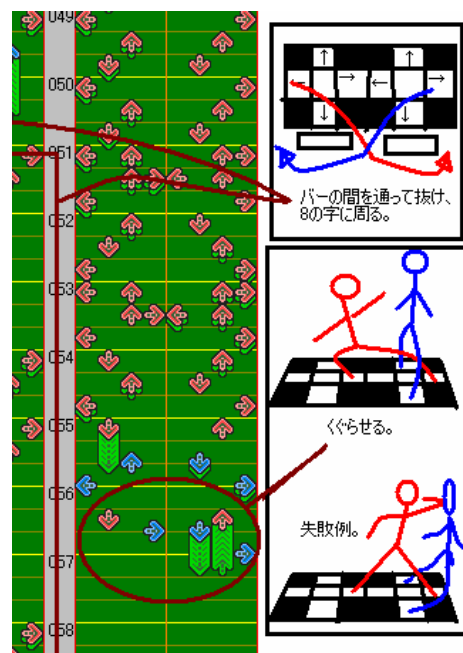
Thirdly, with the competitive spirit came inter-team tournaments (either in person or by means of posted scores on the internet BBSs of the time). This was usually limited to scorer teams anyways, and those with no interest didn't have to participate, but again, not participating and seeing all of the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

Although on the topic of tournaments, a new type of tournament challenge would arise, and the inspiration for that would come from the "Challenge Mode" in the home versions of DDR 4<sup>th</sup> and Extra mixes. These challenges were completely different such as aiming for a specific mid-level score, to get more Greats than Perfects, to not get a combo higher than 3, etc. This inspiration would result in new and/or alternate "challenge" tournaments or events that would run alongside a main score-based tournaments, and would live on to the present day.



On that last point, it is interesting to know 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 comradery was still there, but mentality and focus of the players (and their teams) had changed. The general trustworthiness of the Japanese players continues to the present day. 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 is mostly due to the tight knit nature of the scoring “community”, though.

There was a small cult phenomenon around the time of DDR 4<sup>th</sup> mix, however. Before the home versions or 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



Oh God, I don't know

since they felt it gave an unfair advantage to know about awkward rhythms and patterns beforehand as opposed to bashing away at them in the arcade, so there was a very confined sort of DDR media/stepchart 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 would come into play again not too many years later.

Furthermore in the scene, arcade operators started to take notice to the mass overabundance of 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. Some would opt to try and make their arcade experience more attractive to the gamers while some would send the machines back to the warehouse (more on this in a moment)

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 have small luxuries like cheap drink vending machines or free drink



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



merchandise there as well, though they were overpriced and not the main focus of the arcade. In the eyes of the music game fans at the time, Konami could do no wrong.

Back to the "machines shipped back to the warehouse" point, this would be sad news for many of the local players, though it would prove to be good for the overseas market, as even though these warehouses weren't always legally allowed to ship the machines itself overseas due to copyright and distribution rights, they would sometimes sell



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

to another 3rd party distributor that *\*would\** continue on to ship overseas. All of those machines in America and Europe? All bootleg, though Konami obviously wasn't that keen on trying to hunt them all down. Actually, it may have helped them penetrate the North American and European markets.

Lastly, to get back to the point about the fading of Eurobeat/Dance/Techno music from the mainstream, I'll mention something Konami inadvertently did that would change the type of music used in future music games. It is 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), but during 4th mix, they decided to hold two separate music audition contests. One would be for an artist/group that would receive a contract to help produce and perform music for a song in the upcoming 5th mix (and later on to other mixes if successful), and the other was a composer contest whose winning work may also appear in DDR 5th mix.

The winners were the group known as BeForU who would go on to perform the song "Dive" for DDR 5th mix, produce a number of songs for many of the music game series as well as their own material, and Ken Matsumoto (known as STM) who would team up with the Konami composer Naoki Maeda to produce the next in the "Paranoia" series of songs, Paranoia Eternal. As a side note, this song also became known as Paranoia Yojo (Yojo = little girl) jokingly, originating from his friends but spread through the more popular fan sites/blogs/BBSs of the time.

This would lay the framework to encourage and attract other independent artists to produce original works for the music game series, though it would come at the price of fewer licenses, particularly Dancemania licensed music. Although other licensed music from other sources would later be used as well, there was always a sense of nostalgia for the Dancemania songs which, even though they were mostly remixes, they were mixes of popular tunes that even casual players or passer-bys could possibly identify. It would act as an attractor for people walking by. In later years, the Namco series

"Taiko no Tatsujin" would exploit this mentality by constantly updating their mixes with the latest popular tunes. That series still lives on a decade later.

# 2001

2001 would be 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 a couple years back were no longer the same type of teams that existed in 1999. As an offshoot, many arcades starting leaving out notebooks for public use near the music games. Kind of a pen and paper BBS, but it was something that did help tie the gamers together at an arcade (or across arcades).

DDR 5th mix would be released this year without much fanfare, though it was a well liked mix. Around this time the shift to score-based play from performance really became obvious (more on this in a moment). One new



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

addition to this mix was the long version songs. These would be worth the same as two songs from a player perspective but were also twice as long. Reactions to this were mostly neutral. It was mildly impressive to the locals if you could full combo a long version song (even if only because it was long and would give the largest combos) though players weren't lining up specifically to play them, as players chose to rather 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 players, even on Maniac difficulty. This would tie in with the following point to create all kinds of drama and conflict later, for better or worse.

(This is the point where I briefly introduce myself into the mix, trying to stay as objective and non-biases 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 series was even known overseas. The local Japanese blogs and sites were all Japan-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 Northwest (Seattle based) community (that would later introduce me to Southern California and Texas based communities). At the time, scoring really well (to the point of an AAA) was unheard of. Just saying you got one would have people automatically brand you a liar or several responses of a sarcastic nature saying they got AAAs on everything in the game on stealth facing backwards while juggling 3 chainsaws.

At this point, I received a request from a Chris Foy (whom some may well know along with Kyle Ward for their work on the In The Groove series) for any footage or photos of these "crazy" AAAs. Fortunately for me, not only

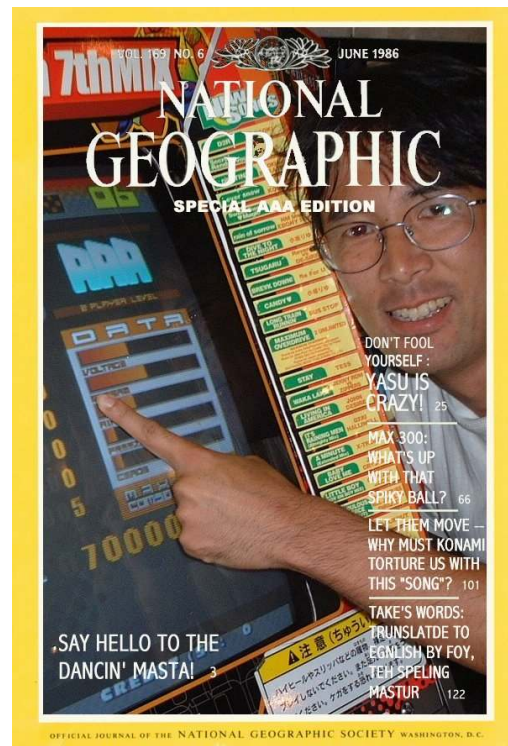


did I have a then-ancient digital camera, I had recently moved to Kanagawa prefecture and was within reasonable distance of the arcade known as "Muthos" where there were actually several players that could pull off these AAAs. On the day I went to ask if people could try to AAA anything for a photo, everyone was happy to oblige, though the three people I ended up getting on photo were myself, Akudaikan, and a very young Yasu.

One important thing to note about the photos is the time at which they are taken. Although the player's best score on a song is 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 be opened and changed on the player's PC to be whatever they want. Granted, it wasn't quite as simple as changing a simple number as it was encoded in reverse hexadecimal, but it wasn't out of the realm of possibility to change. For this reason, even though the window would only be a matter of seconds and some photos were bound to be blurry or off-center, a photo at the results screen was best. The arcade machines themselves could not be hacked or modified in the same way a memory card file could, and thus became the preferred type of photo.

Years later, videos would become 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 somewhere)

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 photos existence (due to Akudaikan and Yasu telling them). Up until that point, people weren't taking photos of scores at all (after all, it was seen as a ridiculously needless thing to do from a personal perspective since your scores could be saved on your memory card) and furthermore, most people had only heard of these AAAs up until that point but had never actually seen a live one.



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

Not only overseas, but even locally where there were players at this skill lever, people were crying "fake" at these accomplishments by their own fellow Japanese players, even on the simplest of songs (some used mathematical "proof" in form of Poisson distribution to show that the odds of getting an AAA were so low they weren't practically possible). Fortunately there were a handful of players capable of doing this and a few quick tours around Tokyo would silence many of the naysayers. It was a cycle, though, in the pattern of:

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

This would all die 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, despite whether or not the players enjoyed the music or steps as well.

As a consequence of the naysayers, name calling, and people calling "BS" on everything, a large number of Japanese players were completely put off the foreign DDR/music game communities. Although these same Japanese players would take indirect cheap shots at each other online (e.g. "I finally got a 15 great full combo on Tribal



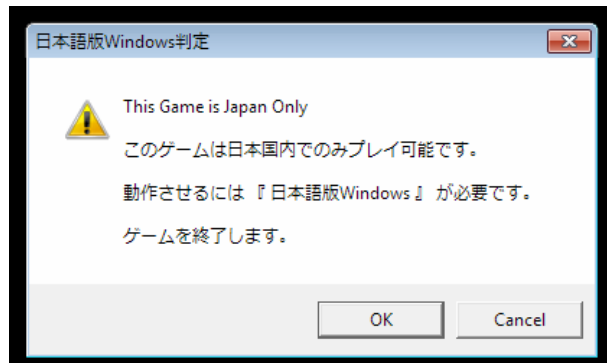
All Greats? Sure, that's good. All  
Perfected? Impossible!

Dance!" "My 10 greats say Hello"), the directness of insults and trolling as they perceived it overseas was seen as far too hostile/direct and they would have nothing to do with it. In reality it was not all directly hostile, and the number of direct insults were not so great (though they did stick out the most), but sarcasm does not convey well on the internet, even less so when

there is a language barrier involved and sarcasm isn't a trait of the (stereo)typical Japanese.

There would be a few Japanese that braved the world of foreign DDR and music game communities, but they would be few and far between. However, after all that is said and done, as years went by, people would 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, it would be a few key people that would try to act as a news conduit from the foreign gamer sites to a more familiar Japanese blog/BBS environment. Also as an unfortunate consequence, people that made sarcastic or insulting remarks to the Japanese communities or players in them 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 believe so they just went "screw it" and phased it all out.

(Note that this phenomenon was not limited to DDR, Final Fantasy 11 online would see something similar, where the Japanese had been playing for a while before the American players got the game and went online together.



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

The Japanese 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 (it was also so frequent it became a meme here) they set up "Japanese Only" groups and clans. It wasn't because they didn't want to play with the American gamers; it was that the contact between them really got off on the wrong foot, and the mentality/way of doing things rubbed them the wrong way.)

One final note on this topic is that it came to light that Japanese players thought nothing of playing the same song again and again to get their high score/AAA. Although this would be frowned upon overseas, it was a small difference in play style that also fueled some of the fire over accomplishments, particularly since DDR 5th mix did not

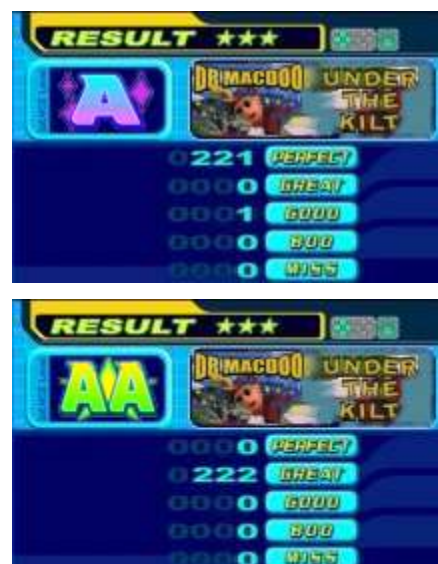


If at first you don't succeed...

award certain score bonuses if you played the song more than once. To the Japanese players though, the AAA was far more important to them than what the number was at the bottom of the results screen.

It was also apparent that Konami was oblivious to the skill of certain players or blissfully ignorant. At one point, there was a light mode tournament happening on one of the 4 DDR machines at Circo Porto. The winner of that weekly tournament got 3 greats on a simple song on basic difficulty (My Generation). During the congratulations speech by the Konami staff, Yasu would play Afronova Primeval on Maniac mode and get 3 greats (3 off an AAA) on the machine next to that. While the other players were looking and pointing at the score stunned, the staff, whom specifically looked at the result as well as could hear the gasps from the audience shrugged along with grunting "Whatever" (betsu ni) and going 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 would decide the winner over score. This was blatantly unfair in some cases (A full combo was overvalued such that



A mockup example of why basing winners on letter grades first was dumb



a full combo of “greats” would outrank a score of all “Perfects” minus 1 good/boo/miss) but at least this came to light during this mix and the way the letter grade is calculated would change with the next mix of DDR.

The next big excitement for the DDR players of this time (who by this point were largely more regular gamers that played for score as opposed to casual gamers just playing for fun) would be with the upcoming DDR MAX.

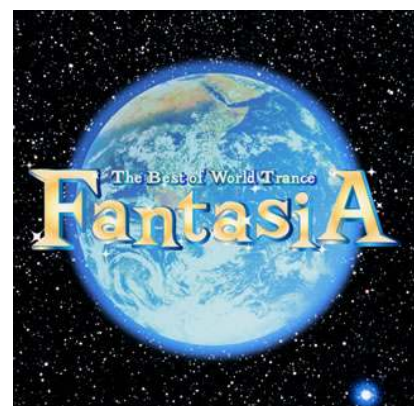
The test location machine in the Ikebukuro St. Tropez arcade drew huge lines to play. There were a lot of changes made to the core mechanics and the user options with which users could tinker. Speed modifiers, freeze arrows, more difficult charts, etc... It was a pretty exciting event for the players of the time.



Shiny new mix...

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 a few players at least to pick up the trance CD that made up part of the soundtrack, “Fantasia: The Best of World Trance”



DDR MAX would push a few sales of this at least.

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 would get used to it quickly, though it did trip up the players at the test location version.

One big change that came in the song selection screen is the absence of the “foot rating” system in favour of the “Groove radar”. Although future mixes would incorporate this system as well as the traditional foot ratings, this was the only mix to not have foot ratings at all.



Pretty chart, but in the end players just wanted a single number

This gave a more precise preview of what kind of steps were used in the song, 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 would be restored in the next mix, however. The five categories used in the graph (and their meanings were) :

Stream – Overall density of steps in the step chart

Voltage – Represents the Peak density of steps in the step 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 start on a quarter note

This would also be the first time the "intimidation" factor would hammer down on some of the players. It didn't affect the more hardcore players much, but with the huge gap in difficulty between standard and expert, some of the non-hardcore crowd became discouraged with the songs and their difficulty, driving some away. Others would withdraw themselves to playing Light/Standard modes only.

In the final release that soon followed, and even with the test location version, 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. This would remain



Max 300 : T-Shirt not included

more to the circles of DDR players and music game fans. At the time, getting a letter grade of AA or better would get you the Encore Extra Stage, but that was a rare sight. Anyone that could pass Max 300 with an AA was viewed as a godly player. It is important to note that the way the letter grades were calculated at this point differed such that it was based on “dance points”, or the player’s ratio of score (by assigning weighted values to Perfects/Greats, etc.) to the maximum possible. To cut to the chase, from

this point on, full combos are not as critically important in determining letter grade as it was with previous mixes.

Even though this newest mix had many features that the players really loved (adjustable scroll speed modifiers, scroll direction, freeze arrows, etc.), there was a slight disappointment at the relatively small number of songs compared to 4th+ or even 5th mix. Even so, this mix remains as a very well remembered mix for its time.

As mentioned a few paragraphs earlier, though. There was a noticeable gap between the standard and expert (Heavy) difficulties. For some, the hurdle was intimidating enough that they would stay on Light and Standard modes only, despite there being a few easier "Heavy" charts available.

One thing that did start to happen was that the more of the hardcore players would come more into contact with each other. Not only through the internet, but occasionally players would travel in groups across the country to meet up with another group. There was the comradery of the teams from 3rd mix to a degree, but this time it was \*all\* related to playing only for score.

Later in this year, the test location for 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 allowed himself to be in photos. Although this was a tremendous help in getting the news about this mix out across the globe, Konami would tighten down security from this point on and such openness wouldn't be seen at future test locations.

Finally, to close out the year, the Circo Porto arcade in Shinjuku closed down. 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. Around this time, though.



Shinjuku Circo Porto, closed for the last time

Music game fans had other arcades

they were frequenting that were closer to where they lived and cheaper in many cases (Circo Porto was charging 200 yen a game for many of their titles). The arcade was pivotal prior to that point, and it is still unclear if they really were hurting for money or if gamers were more content with sticking to their local arcades, but for whatever reason, Konami decided to close down the arcade. Fortunately for gamers, there were many arcades around, even some just a block away from Circo Porto that had most of the Bemani music game series as well as other titles.

## 2002

As DDR players enter 2002, the scene is predominantly comprised of players known as "score attackers" or those that play with the specific goal of getting the highest scores possible (that they can). Although there will still be the occasional freestyle performer at certain locations,



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

(mostly in crowded areas where the DDR machine is along a path where many will pass by) actually seeing someone like that is an increasingly rare event.

As a side note, Konami would release another game to try and cash in on the fitness craze of the time with their "Martial Beat" title. This wouldn't be that noteworthy except that it made use of old DDR hardware. Although the arcade



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

game was a complete flop, the home versions were marketed as a health/fitness package and had marginal success on that front. The entire game soundtrack also made use of music found in 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> iterations of the DDR series.

DDR MAX 2 would be released in March of this year. This mix was actually awaited by many 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 would be 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 in-your-face (although plain kind of) stereotypical Japanese traditional music).



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

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 start with a set number of "lives" (represented by a battery) to complete a nonstop course containing a fixed set of songs. These oni courses would also be 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 they were interested in, especially since they were not available in normal play.

To a degree, this also continues to the present day, where some players will pick an oni course (or nonstop/challenge course by the present naming scheme) 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 game mode was not intended for beginner players, there were a number of easier courses that were doable by even lesser skilled players.

During the Max 2 days, players at the high enough skill level would continue to get their AAAs but this time there was a purpose to it. The way the unlock system worked on Max 2, you 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. 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, but was a 24h arcade which gave them an advantage).

The amusing part is that Konami expected the unlocks to take \*much\* longer and planned out timed releases of special codes that would partially unlock a machine. The first partial unlock came after the entire unlock contents were made known from this AAA race. Granted, you could only play all of the unlocked content at one of the two fully unlocked arcades 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 underestimate the skill of the hardcore players of the



Want new songs? Just do this...every game...  
all day...for weeks

face at the DDR Extreme test location later). Even so, the reaction from players/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, but they were the only one and couldn't unlock the machine all by themselves in any rushed pace. The only place where this was a disadvantage was the Internet Rankings, where those machines with the unlocked content allowed players to practice specific songs in the courses before being made freely selectable to the masses with the unlock codes later on.

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 a thrill and all 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 the guys (at the Muthos arcade) create when they play. They get the max score or very close on every song and then



afterwards they celebrate among themselves. How are you supposed to follow that?" Some would seek out their own small arcade 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, you had a widening gap in skill that was now very noticeable. On one side, you had the players that were AAAing much of the game on every difficulty level, and on the other, you would have people that could do the easier songs all right but only stumble through everything else. There was no middle ground.

Furthermore, there would be a more subtle backlash online (Japanese community). In this case, it was more about the players that take photos of their scores. Those that would take photos or videos of their scores/gameplay were mocked and branded



White text : "Otaku is Beautiful".

as "otaku" (geeks). It wouldn't be 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.

One more slap in the face (so to speak) would come from Konami itself.



During the Internet Ranking phase, about midway through the ranking, the database containing all of the registered scores crashed. Konami announced there was no backup, they were so sorry, and to please enter your scores again. That would be fine and all if most players bothered to keep an arbitrarily long string of digits lying around. Although some players would find their old scores and register them again, quite a few, even those near the top end of the ranking lists, just chose not to participate anymore.

Finally, there would be a very slight backlash on the level of arcade staff themselves. This was not a common issue but once in a while you would have arcade operators that didn't really like the whole cult following the



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

DDR/music game fan base had appeared to become (based on online chatter and the memos in the local notebooks at many arcades (remember the ones in Circo Porto? Yeah, those are at many arcades by this time))

would do subtle things like  
turning down the volume of the

games or moving them to isolated corners of the arcade, not bother fixing up faulty or dirty equipment, etc. Most places that had incidents of this only had one or two music games that didn't normally draw many customers and/or they didn't like the music in the game/sick of it/etc. It was subtle

but it did stick out enough that the local music game circles were always well aware of these places (and to avoid them).

It would prove frustrating in later years when certain arcades would be the only one in the area left with a certain mix of DDR and it was faulty in some way (stage, screen). There are players (admittedly, mostly hardcore) that would like to play it again but the staff remain uncooperative. The machine may only still be there because it is more expensive to have it hauled away than to just keep it partially running.

Continuing on, even though perfect scores were not completely uncommon anymore, there would be one accomplishment in particular that would turn 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 feet rating), so when the news came out that someone actually AAA'd one, it was seen as unbelievable and initially dismissed as fiction.



The single accomplishment that would launch almost 2 years of arguments, disbelief and drama

(Actually, to add something interesting, Yasu wasn't the first person to AAA 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 would only spread word about it on the local BBSs/internet.)

Anyways, Yasu would redo his accomplishment and this time the result would be caught on camera. This was still not enough for many people, though. This is when a kind of double effort went underway. For the overseas crowds, the local community used whatever equipment they had to try and record this on video, and Yasu, being fed up by all the naysayers locally, took it upon himself to go around (with transportation help by his friends) and demonstrate it live. He wouldn't *\*always\** do it each time on command, but was always consistently close and would usually get it within a few tries, though some days were better than others.

So slowly the local naysayers were replaced by 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 they didn't think it was an impossible task, though they didn't expect to see an AAA on that song for a long time (the actual name of the stepchart creator is lost to time; the news came to me through the rep from Konami at the Max 2 test location)

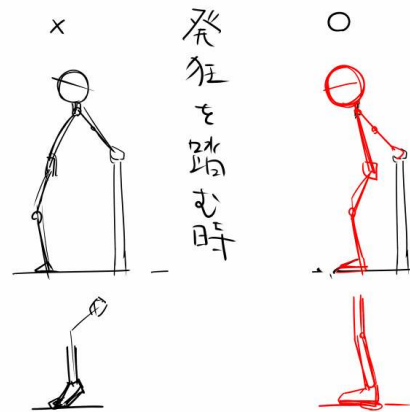
This accomplishment would send shockwaves through the local community

such that the view that players had of the game was strictly that of scoring now. Freestyle performance was somewhere on the back burner, but 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 players would reminisce of "the golden days".

Also, as a side effect to this accomplishment, the waves could definitely be felt from overseas. Although the accomplishment itself caused quite a ruckus and was basically the single dominant topic on DDRFreak for months (the photos and videos taken of Yasu around that time were mainly intended for the overseas communities), it brought about some condescending opinions on play style and exposed some difference between the Japanese and western gamers. 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. Repeatedly playing the same song again and again

The usage of the support bar at the rear of the stage was a focal point for criticism from overseas. Although this kind of play style was not seen before 5th mix, (mostly from 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 that "Oh, that doesn't count because you used the bar" were completely baffling to the local players.



Mock all you want. The Japanese have bar usage down to a science at this point.

This argument would drag on and on over both sides of the Pacific. (Actually, mostly in the west; the Japanese players tended to phase out those remarks and keep on playing regardless, though you could find a few small arguments on 2chan if you looked hard enough; those were nowhere near the majority opinion, though) In conclusion from the Japanese side, there were the following statements:

- \* There is no rule in the game that states you are not supposed to use the bar
- \* The game/Konami does not punish the player in any way for 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 the player to use according to the machine user guide.

In fact, to the Japanese, the obsession over the bar usage argument by the west became comical to some. There would be subtle jabs in various conversations and blogs/BBSs 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"



Me failing to convey humour

Similar to the bar usage argument, speed modifiers also came into play. Some would criticize that it makes the song easier since it is easier to read the arrows that way. Basically, take the response by the Japanese from the bar usage argument and plug it in here (phase out). However, as an additional argument by the Japanese, there was a quote "If (Japanese) players were so dependent on speed modifiers that they couldn't do anything without them, why do the Japanese dominate all of the Internet ranking oni course lists?" (Note: speed modifiers were not selectable in oni/challenge mode)

This argument would pop up once in a while, even to the point that visitors from abroad still riding on the wave caused by the Max 300 AAA would ask for videos played on "1x 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 you stopped using them. Either luck or skill was on the Japanese player's (including Yasu) side for those occasions because they still managed to AAA a number of songs that way regardless, even some on the first try playing that way.

Lastly, the argument on playing the same song repeatedly (sometimes known as "whoring" the song out) was a smaller but notable point. Japanese players in general think nothing of repeating a song for a better score. To the more hardcore players, playing the same song for hours to try and AAA it doesn't even bat an eye. Some would think the staff or other gamers would raise complaints, but actually, that wasn't the case either. So when someone points out "Hey, you're playing the same song for the (n)th time!" the response will most likely be "So?"

During this part of the DDR community life cycle, a very odd form of elitism would emerge (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/groups took it upon themselves to become a "leader" of their own connected group. 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.

These groups would be responsible for organizing various tournaments and events, but 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 felt excluded and an outcast. The community of music game fans did come together, but they would be in various groups as opposed to any kind of unified community.

Where the "elitism" came into place was more and more obvious as some of them had contacts at Konami, and one 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 would flare when one "group" knew something someone else did but would not share solely because they weren't part of the "club".

There would be 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 stepchart with the message "We worked hard to get this and do not want to share". 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."

As a result, the DDR Extreme test location was under strict security when it finally did appear. I happened to be in line that day from the early morning and witnessed first hand this one part-time staffer blocking the screen, jumping in front of players trying to block them from



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

taking down/recording media and other information on the game as well as threats from the arcade staff that they would confiscate cameras. Of course, song lists and various media was sneaked out, which of course enraged this part-time staffer, but fortunately this would be the peak of this inter-group rival "we-control-the-information" nonsense and it would get better from here, with old rivals even becoming friends in the end.

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.

One non-related event would surprise the Konami reps (and Naoki himself) there at the test location, though. One of the Konami staff sitting at the back was jotting down what songs people were playing and what their letter grade was. There were a few AAAs done on that test location machine and it seemed to shock the Konami staff (including an AAA on Love Shine Expert, on the first time ever seen by anyone), whom would later write on the Konami DDREX test location blog "We need to be very careful not to cater our step charts and difficulty to players like that". One can only wonder how that affected future step charts/difficulty. At the time, however, for every 1 player like that, there were easily a dozen more that were nowhere near as capable of performing the same feats. Though by the same token, it would be mostly the hardcore crowd that would attend these test location events anyways, thus skewing the perceived average player skill level.

So, after a bit of waiting, DDR Extreme would be released Christmas Day, 2002.

## 2003-2005

After the initial collection (and subsequent distribution) of information/media related to the newest release of DDR (primarily intended for the overseas audience), people would focus their energies on this newest mix. At the time, although the licensed music used this time around really didn't impress that much, the introduction of crossovers from other Bemani series was most welcome. It was around this time that the original music composed by Konami's in-house composers would generally exceed that of the licensed music, despite the fact it was still licensed from the Dancemania label.

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 a lot of people went through.

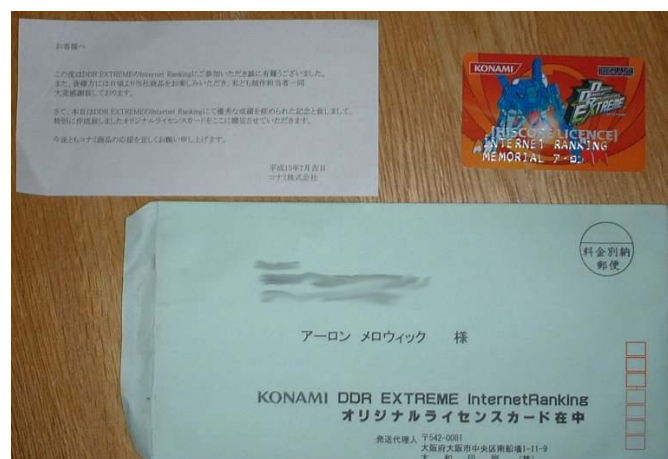
In this era, it wasn't the more skilled players forming "teams"; it was the casual gamer that happened to frequent an arcade with a core clique of players. None of these teams were ever very "formal", and they were almost all scorer groups, but in name



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

only. The only time someone else would notice or see would be online where a player name would be suffixed with "@(group name)"

By this time, many of the upper-tier players were competing pretty fiercely for top spots on the Internet Ranking lists. Although it was not known to the players at the time, this would be the last time Konami would offer real physical gifts/memorabilia



Back in the old days they used to give real prizes, even if in this particular case it was a plastic card and a congratulations letter

for placing on their Internet Ranking lists. (For 5th mix, you got a folding fan with the characters in the game printed on it. For DDR Extreme, you got a custom printed plastic card (credit card size/thickness) with the IR info and the player's name/ranking on it)

During this time, communication with the overseas communities was taking off, though the flow of communication definitely seemed more biased towards info. from Japan heading overseas than the other way around. Despite that, this was a period when players or fans from overseas would actually take time out of their visit to Japan (or in some cases, make 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 have read about or seen photos/videos of online. There was a perception of a deification of certain players from within the Japanese community, and getting back to a point from the previous year on the elitist groups that sprung up, it did cause a bit of anger and jealousy among them, though most bickering would stay to smaller local BBSs.

As a result, higher quality media of the players/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/or digital cameras.

One point that emerged from the overseas players that would continue for years on, but really only came into light around this era was "shadowing" or 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 is considered extremely rude and in general is not done at all except in cases such as the two players were playing normally and one failed out mid-song but still keeps playing as if he/she didn't fail. Once in a while

someone waiting in line will mimic the steps subtly, though that is always out of sight of the current player.

Another phenomenon that was prominent in the west but not so in Japan was the "coin line" method of keeping track of player's turns on the machine. Basically, this was the method whereby players would put a coin, card, or other piece of ID on the machine to signify a place in line waiting for a turn on the machine. True, in the earliest mixes of DDR (read: 1st) this was tried, but quickly became outdated and raised complaints from the players tired of distractions from the others putting coins or cards, etc. on the machine during play. It quickly became known as rude behaviour to do such things. In lieu of this, arcades and the players themselves agreed on forming a queue behind/around the machine (as the architecture of the arcade dictated). Leaving the queue normally forfeited your place in line, though there were always exceptions (e.g. leaving a personal artifact while going to the bathroom). Since petty theft of this nature wasn't really a problem (and only happened in isolated, extreme cases), this was the norm and remained so until the present day. Over time, these queues would become looser and in numerous arcades, the honour system of first come first serve was in place. Rarely did this cause a problem. Normally, in cases of uncertainty on who goes next, players take a step or two towards the machine and look around at the other players. If no gesture or statement is made, it is safe to play. Players will make some kind of vocal statement if there is 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.

Also around this time, more overseas players were also gradually able to get 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. There were a few nuances that did confuse the Japanese though, they were:

- \* "pad crap"

- \* Counting Songs left / Accomplishments

- \* Tournament mentality (though this was more for the later years of the DDREX life cycle)

(...and to a lesser degree now, but it would play a more important role later, play style)

So firstly, "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/system as opposed to the player. One important thing to note is that this would be primarily a western phenomenon. The reasons for this are compound.

In general, the Japanese machines are generally kept in excellent condition by not only the arcade staff but by the players themselves (there are wet towels and cloths nearby most machines that the players would use to wipe down the stage). The staff would regularly clean and maintain the machine because players usually had easy access to machines at other arcades, and if their machine wasn't working, the players would go to somewhere else that was.

Also, the mentality in general among the Japanese DDR community is that if you see a "boo" or "miss", etc., it is generally accepted to be the fault of the player. True, if a particular arrow on a machine is acting up (or if the machine was flaky due to not being maintained in ages), it was obvious to say that the machine was at fault. However, if the machine is giving random errors, the mentality/logic was to go find one that doesn'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 something that would break a combo was viewed with the thought "Aw, tough break" and that this unfortunate incident "just happened". Again, in cases like this, even though no direct blame is laid, the player would be understood to be at fault first, and the machine only if other players or 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 playing outside the rules"

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

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



Mind you, some people get crappy scores on purpose.

gamers would draw blank stares, even when the meaning is understood, because the concept is not a part of the play mindset.

Secondly, the topic of counting accomplishments or how many "songs are left" as related to accomplishments. It was noted locally that for whatever reason, players that played for AAAs abroad would tend to only count songs on Heavy or Oni difficulty, primarily on single.

The single argument was understood because although joint premium mode (playing on double for the same price as single) was common in Japan at the time, it wasn't so abroad. That argument made sense despite the fact there were local players that would gladly pay double the price just to play on double mode.

The point of difference tended to be that the Japanese DDR players also cared to play all of the step charts on Light and Standard modes as well.



To them, a song isn't "finished" unless it has been AAA'd on all difficulties,

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

single and double. Only playing Heavy/Oni was good enough for most intents and purposes, but there were many subtle and/or tricky step charts, particularly on the boss songs and for the songs on standard difficulty on double mode since it was harder than the so-called Heavy/Expert chart (in mixes prior to 3rd, there was no double maniac mode, so the double standard chart \*was\* the Expert chart, and in quite a few cases, the "standard" chart

of the old days was more difficult than the added Expert charts of modern mixes).

In short, "finishing" DDR Extreme would mean getting an AAA on all songs on all difficulties, single and double. Talk of "finishing" the game by only counting heavy/oni charts on single would draw responses such as "but that only makes up less than 1/6 of the charts in the game". Yeah, it is understood many of the light and standard charts are complete cakewalks in comparison, but it is the exceptions that make the local players not rule them all out altogether.

Lastly, there was a slight difference in play mentality as it pertained to tournaments, which would widen as years went on.

Tournaments in Japan were generally planned out a few months in advance, and were almost always single elimination. The general pattern would be that the qualifier rounds and even the round or two after that would be a preset series of songs. The final rounds would be a best of 3 or 5 in general. Modifiers such as speed modifiers, turn modifiers, and use of the bar were always all fair game except where explicitly forbidden, but that would only be for "gimmick" rounds such as standing behind the stage putting the player's legs through the space under the bar to play or playing 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. The only place this would be legally allowed would be at a tournament officially run/sponsored by Konami (though there would be the occasional small tournament that would give cash prizes "under the table", though even then it would not be a significant amount).



Of course, no tournament would give alcohol to the winner...

As a result, prizes tended to be random candy or toys/merchandise from the UFO catchers or such. Hence, the focus of the tournament was more for fun and a chance to meet up with everybody as opposed to a large cash prize. To further this point, it is amusing to note that although competitions were indirect (what one player did did not affect the other player directly), the mindset was similar as well in the sense it wasn't one player vs. another so much as one player and another player competing to see who can beat the machine at its own game the hardest.

The last point with tournaments involves preparation. Since the song list was known beforehand, the recommended strategy was to know all the songs in the game (not so much effort focused on the 10-footers since they were not even used in a number of tournaments anyways, and even then it might only be in the final round) and "whore out" the songs on the

tournament song list like there was no tomorrow. In later years, a popular opinion/strategy suggestion would be "don't whore songs" but in this time, "whoring songs" was the way players won tournaments in Japan. (It was also the way I won one tournament here). Practice on the home versions was done as well, but usually only to watch "practice" mode and to memorize when the "assist ticks" would sound. 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 stepchart artist..

In general, a Japanese tournament in this era would have a number of the songs AAA'd, sometimes by both players in the same round. Tie breakers were still not *that* common as it results were usually based on machine score, which weighted steps at the end of the song more heavily than ones at the beginning, and 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 that last paragraph, you might have figured out that tournaments in general were not won on the 10-footers, but on the random 8 and 9 footers that one player banked on the fact the other hadn't practiced.

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

smaller local tournaments for a while yet).

There was always the option of custom stepchart data, though that never really gained in popularity except as a novelty. Unlike in the west where players would actually place custom stepchart (and custom stepmania/DWI files) on the same level as "official" charts, and also gain widespread popularity. That wasn't the case in Japan where there really were no custom step charts (or stepmania songs) that reached the masses. The closest a custom stepchart project got to widespread popularity and recognition in Japan was the "Foonmix" project(s). This was organized and created within one of the DDR "groups" mentioned earlier. Although a considerable amount of effort was put into getting it all finished, it would still never reach mass worldwide or even Japan-wide level of popularity.

At this time, many of the players, particularly the hardcore ones, were more or less done with DDR Extreme, or played as much as they felt like by that time. The mix was stale in the eyes of the Japanese gamers, and there were no announcements from Konami at



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

that time that a new mix was coming. Many thought this was the last DDR and slowly, players simply stopped playing and moved on to other games

(Beatmania IIDX was a popular one), even the hardcore players of the time. To this day, primarily because of the very long time between DDR Extreme and Supernova, players will usually remember DDR Extreme as a very stale mix and there aren't many that actually wish to play it again except for the songs that were exclusive to that mix.

During this time, there would be two new home versions of the game, “DDR Festival” and “DDR Str!ke”. Both were launched with much fanfare, including some of the musicians and licensed artists at places like the Velfarre, and a cross promotion with the 2005 movie “Rize” in Shibuya DUO. One thing that is important to note, however, is that fans of the series were going to these events primarily for the events themselves rather than the home version game being promoted (DDR was, after



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

Below : Rize movie cross promotion at Shibuya DUO

all, perceived to be an arcade experience). With the DDR Festival Launch, there were many of the artists from BeForU, Naoki, U1-Asami and others there (who fans wanted to see) and an AAA tournament where the winners would receive autographed merchandise. The “Rize” movie cross promotion was amusing, and when players thought about it there was some



understandable logic to it ('dancing simulation game' -> 'dance movie'), but even though it piqued some interest, especially with the promotion clip on the game disc, "Rize" wasn't exactly a cultural phenomenon (though to its credit, I and the few others I know that had seen it found the movie \*far\* more entertaining than the other movie tie-in found later in DDR Supernova "Back Dancers").

Yet, it would be more than a year after \*that\* realization/transition phase in 2004 until the next arcade DDR mix would come out. 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 sites based abroad to find out what was happening in America and Europe.

One such item noticed by the Japanese was the development and release of a game "In The Groove". Even though due to legal action by Konami, In The Groove (referred to here on as ITG) would never see the light of day in Japan (apart from one notable exception at an arcade (World Game Circus) that would only be open for a little over a year).

However, the home version would be



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



available (though expensive) through import shops here. 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.

With no new DDR on the horizon apart from some disappointing home versions now and then, ITG was seen as something that had potential to entertain, but no one knew if they could ever really take the series that seriously since it was highly unlikely arcade mixes would find their way to Japan anyways.

A few players did give a good go at the game and although there were songs and charts that players did like (Xuxa, Queen of Light, Charlene), there was a general impression (remember, this is subjective) that it was focusing a lot more on fast, stamina draining charts at the upper end of the spectrum. It was seen as being on the brink of an overachiever's game. This wasn't necessarily a bad thing, but it wasn't something that the locals were dying to do, either. The locals actually preferred charts that were at reasonable speeds, but had complicated rhythms.

Somewhere amidst this, there were rumors about the release of the next in the DDR series and it caused a frenzy. Even though most news about this wouldn't hit until the following year, in the west it was perceived (by the Japanese) to be as a knee-jerk reaction to ITG, and even in Japan, there was a little bit of that feeling of "Oh, if we (Konami) don't do something, ITG or

something like it might take hold and destroy our market! (that we have been neglecting)"

Although the game wouldn't come out until the following year, there was a definite hype among the former players for this new mix. Unfortunately, some of those that quit DDR when they were finished with DDR Extreme (including some of the more hardcore players) would not return (though others would join and take their place)

One final thing to note revolves around the communication and relationship of the local Japanese community and overseas. In the fall of 2005, 3 local Japanese players (all right, 2 and 1 foreigner living in Japan) were flown to England as a kind of special guest for the DDR/music game booth at the



Flown to London to play dancing games as special guests? Pure awesome.

exposition held twice a year. Up until that point, there was limited contact online including a random off-kilter request for anything special to be done for Yasu's 300th AAA on Max 300. The hospitality and courtesy received both before, during and after the expo spread throughout the Japanese community by word of mouth/online, and DDRUK, the Administrator (Colin) and to a lesser extent the community, were held in a very positive esteem. Even though most 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 kind of portal to the outside DDR/music game world, despite the existence of several other fan sites of the same nature, and would use it for resources such as step charts and files related to DDR simulation on their PC.

# 2006

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 were high hopes for the next mix that would appear this year. There would not be much in the way of DDR community events and get-togethers in the first half of the year, though.

There were high hopes despite some notable problems at the test location, the most serious of which being that some songs (especially those with background video) tended to have a random sync each time you played it. 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 periodically not working, but the staff refused to fix it (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 up 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 stepchart artists didn't intend and/or something to show off/test yourself and your friends.

Of the good things from the test location, players were quick to pick up on the introduction of certain Konami original songs such as "Xepher" and "Quick Master". It was interesting to note that the hype for the music would revolve mostly around the Konami original tunes and crossovers from other Bemani series than any of the licensed music (though in the final release, many did actually enjoy most of the licensed tunes despite the fact it wasn't like the Dancemania licenses from the past)

Also, the biggest change of all was the move to use of the eAmuse network. Now, players could use their all-in-one card (as opposed to different cards for each game) to track their scores, track their progress against rivals, and use it as an online ID for automatic entry in things like the Internet Rankings. It was even more exciting since it was announced there would be overseas versions and players would all compete together (mostly for Internet Ranking lists)

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



2006 DDR Supernova "Revival" Party.

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 got a new one for this new release. Other places patched up their machines, cleaned them up and got them ready as well.

The initial release brought a lot of attention really fast. Some of the former hardcore players from the previous generation of DDR would come back and do their best to AAA the entire game (including one who spent the majority of the first day playing one song in particular just to say he AAA'd it on the first day (Fujitake and the song Xepher on Challenge difficulty)), though 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 player 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" score for each song shown in the brief moments between when a song is selected and the gameplay starts.

When this mix was first released, the rule for these scores was that the highest one would be shown, but a score that tied the older one would not overwrite the player/score for the record. This was a slight problem to the more skilled players at the time since most of 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 at all and the eAmuse high scores were almost a completely static list by this point. Indirectly, this was almost demotivational to the more skilled players.

This was changed not too much later (over the eAmuse network to all the connected machines (read: pretty much all of them in Japan)) so that scores that tied the old one would take the record. It was a small change, but it worked really well and in became a very subtle glance at what the other (admittedly, more skilled) players had been doing/playing.



At last, I can see my name for records on simple songs

One other thing the eAmuse system would allow resulted in something that was viewed with skepticism by the Japanese gamer community. Konami would assist in promoting the movie "Back Dancers" (a film that makes "You Got Served" look like cinematic perfection in comparison I might add) by means on a one month unlock of a special song and course. The song was broken as players would immediately notice. For whatever reason, the arrows did not scroll



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

smoothly and stuttered their way up the screen against clips from the movie. The unlock itself 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 in the game in the first place).

Now, from all of this I don't mean to intend 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 came over 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 they did serve as some common base for conversation at times.

- \* Gradual BPM changes

- \* Slow songs (because of broken quantization)

- \* Rapid jumps (debatable, this was more of an issue with a few groups of players than everyone together)

Gradual BPM changes are the bane of many a player here. To this day with the most recent mixes, the songs that people will gripe over online to no end are the ones with a gradually changing bpm, even complaining over this more so than the hardest songs in the game.



Gradual BPM changes made the average Japanese gamer feel like this trying to AAA it

Most of the players will use the beat/audio to help keep themselves in time, even when they are playing mostly relying on the visual clues of the arrows reaching the casting at the top. A sudden BPM change is actually not too big of a problem because they are seen as two different sections treated differently, but the gradual BPM change blurs one section into another and many players find it truly awkward to try and time the steps in those sections.

Moving on, slow songs in themselves are not such a problem, though some

players are annoyed by songs that are too slow for personal reasons. The problem is that to have any kind of step pattern that moves at a faster speed compared with the BPM of the song, the chart may have 16th steps or syncopated patterns. The problem with the syncopated patterns is that the system does not properly quantize the beats and as a result the player has to step at a stuttered rhythm to compensate. This is not usually an issue with the faster songs.

Lastly, rapid jumps. This involves either a rapid series of jumps one after the other (not all on the same two arrows) or a stream of steps and jumps in one long stream. As I mentioned in the list above, this is debatable to add, but big enough of an issue



Several jumps in a row wouldn't be such an issue for some if their legs were more like this

that I think it deserves notice. This phenomenon was mostly complained about by players from the older mixes but in general. Although most other patterns are 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, would feature charts with more than 3 in a row though almost no Japanese players would have ever played them), and the only other place you saw long streams of them were in custom edit data. During the DDR Extreme days in particular, edit data that relied on rapid jumps as the gimmick would

cause all sorts of havoc for players. It is possible the mindset that this is like those gimmicky edits may be the source of the problem.

For the record, two elements that others might consider broken or annoying that overall, really didn't bother the players much at all:

- \* crossovers

- \* off-sync step charts

Crossovers are basically when the player moves one leg to "cross over" the other in a turn or twist to step on another arrow (and continue the step pattern/stream). In Japan as well as abroad, one of the best known examples of this was Afronova from DDR 3rd mix. That chart and the way it made you move your body to do the whole section as one constant stream was seen as brilliant in Japan and even with other songs/charts that made use of this in later mixes, there never was a hatred for crossing your legs over one another (though it would 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 will you find players complaining about this.

Off-sync songs is another kind-of debatable entry. Yes, when players talk about a song and they seem to get a high number of greats or other non-perfect step, someone else that knows the chart will comment "Oh, you

have to step a bit early on this chart" or "you should try stepping a bit later". Although it would be nice to have all charts on sync par se, even the perception of what is "on sync" differs between players. Since many players play based on the audio (and others relying more on visual cues), sometimes players will do very well going only by the audio whereas someone playing



It's early! No, late! Oh, I don't know.

visually would say it is early/late. There were cases of songs agreed to be off-sync though, especially with DDR Supernova. Any song with a prerendered background video would tend to be late and the song Red Zone was always really late on the Japanese Supernova cabinets.

Now, that being said, the more skilled/hardcore (or those that just put tons of money into the machine) tended to finish the game as much as they wanted rather quickly, only within a few months. At this time, nobody had AAA'd some of the hardest songs of the mix like Fascination Maxx or the Eternal Love Mix of that song, but 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. Some would still bang 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 to pass it and then show it off at an arcade. 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 would turn a few heads in the arcade whenever someone played/tried the song.

So, with the more dedicated crowd out of the way, what would happen? 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. 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. But the big things that would keep the machines busy were the internet rankings.

On the topic of Internet Rankings, this time the registration of scores was all automatic from the Japanese side. No writing down codes or names or scores to enter in at home later; when you finished the course, your score was entered right then and there.

This was good and bad because although it was instant, some of the more self conscious players would 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 if you wanted your score submitted.

Also, since the rest of the world was not on eAmuse at this time, the Internet Ranking lists were full of Japanese players and very few from other countries. This gave a very lopsided view of skill, even to the Japanese for whom this favoured.

RANK		DANCE NAME	PREF	SCORE
1		KJ	愛知県	8261
2		MICH	岡山県	7211
3		MA.-.M-Y	神奈川県	6351
4		TSUCCO	岐阜県	6106
5		ZZ	福島県	5927
6		INTAIMAX	千葉県	5793
7		666	神奈川県	5635
8		YASU	神奈川県	5563
9		EMCAPERN	---	5473
10		AT MAO	宮城県	5454
11		NZ	神奈川県	5304
12		DOR-KOJI	兵庫県	5263
13		MINAMITE	埼玉県	5246
14		IRMA	新潟県	5157
15		MATCHIE	群馬県	5055
16		SOR-BIG	大阪府	4893
17		BACAMAXT	神奈川県	4876
18		YUKIMA	兵庫県	4784
19		BSC.	東京都	4771
20		6.6.-.6.	埼玉県	4694
21		RIN	大阪府	4635
22		ARCHAGE	岡山県	4592
23		S.K	北海道	4575
24		LEADER.	岡山県	4553
25		CHOCOLA	福島県	4547
26		UMA	宮城県	4250
27		TAKA-ASK	埼玉県	4078
28		SPY-C.-.	宮城県	4064
29		ASPAKAS	新潟県	4049
30		HOLICMY	---	3724

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

And to close off this section (and on the topic of overseas players), for whatever reason, a few of the players from overseas became well known in Japan thanks to the internet and through whatever channels the media came



JBoy, forever known to Japanese DDR players as

Mr. "COME ON!"

to them. The three players that became known were "Jboy" "MegamanX" and "Pickles". There is no reason or rhyme to why these three in particular were picked since they all had (to the locals) impressive records and scores, though Jboy is 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. His mannerisms in his video were actually so amusing to the Japanese there were discussions at times about pooling money to fly him over because he seemed like such an interesting player. Obviously, this never came to light, but for whatever reason Jboy fascinated the locals, even if by more his personality/nature than his skill as it seemed.

## 2007-2008

As 2007 rolls in, DDR Supernova is still around. It is still getting attention, especially as there are still tournaments being held among the players and the communities they have 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 (more and more from Konami original artists, I might add) would still go on.



Club Velfarre closed Jan 1, 2007 after one last giant New Year's bash

One difference in the tournaments of this era is that up until this point, tournaments have 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 is deserved. Around this time, there is the occasional tournament that is kept to a local arcade crowd only or meant for amateur or otherwise non-skilled players. Although there were never any rules forbidding any of the more skilled players in the community, (what would you say? "no expert players"?) in general the smaller tournaments were left to the intended audience.

Although one would think this was make no sense financially for not



wanting such players, (from the point of view of the arcade) there are players that are extremely discouraged from watching/playing against others at a much higher skill level, and will not participate at all in such an environment.

Although these cases were in the minority when talking about tournaments, there were casual players that would be discouraged and even go 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 would focus almost exclusively on the easier difficulty levels and shun higher level play, despite the narrowing gap between difficulty levels.

So the next release in the DDR series was announced relatively early in the life cycle of the current mix. It was about the same length of time as with the (much) older mixes in retrospect, but considering that it was well over 3 years between DDR Extreme and Supernova, the announcement of a new mix not even 1 year into Supernova seemed extremely quick in comparison.

One thing that stood out in the test location reports from DDR Supernova 2 was the design and look of the 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.



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

Another point 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 the count, either to use as a base for seeing which songs burned the most calories, as an excuse/reminder that the player is 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..."). Some would also set a personal goal of xxxx calories burned for their day/play session for health and fitness reasons.

Lastly was the quantization "fix". For slower songs where the previous system could not properly quantize the beat properly, the player had to compensate by stepping a stuttered rhythm. However, the system was now dividing beats more precisely and this made quite a few of the expert

gamers happy (except for those that struggled to compensate the way they played to get a good score in previous mixes, only to see that this kind of effort wasn't needed anymore)



Patches and updates happened regularly.

Much like Windows, the game would ask for a  
reboot after each update.

On the other side of the coin, two things stuck out from the test location version that were initially unsettling to some players, though they would eventually get used to it, were:

- \* Step Judgments broken down further to including a more precise "Marvelous" step judgment
- \* The once hallmark "AAA" in itself has been lessened in rank from what players knew

The "Marvelous" judgment was used previously in DDR mixes since Extreme, though only in challenge course scoring. Opinions abroad were generally in favour of this timing added to normal play, though locally it was

unsettling to some primarily because one trick players used to make sure they were on track was to subconsciously notice the yellow "Perfect!" judgment text. Now that there were two different words that would mean essentially the same thing, (as it referred to getting an AAA in the old sense) it threw some players off. It also was a problem with the more self-conscious players that did not actually want to see the detail level of judgment go down that far (and to be displayed on the results screen) in normal play, with no option to disable it.

Regarding the "AAA" rank, up until this mix, an "AAA" was the hallmark "All Perfects" score. There was none higher, and that rank signified it. With Supernova 2, an AAA itself was awarded with a score greater than (or equal to) 990,000 points (out of a potential maximum 1,000,000 points). That meant the players could still get an AAA with greats or even a miss or two. The way the new system worked was to include coloured circles next to the "AAA" mark to indicate a full combo, combo of all Perfects/Marvelous steps, or all Marvelous steps (a rare thing to see in this mix)

It may have been elitism of the expert players or the precocious nature of the slightly less skilled than the expert



An AAA that had Greats? Blasphemy.

players, but depending on how you looked at it, either the expert players did not like

to see "AAA" grades for scores that weren't all Perfects/Marvelous steps, or the slightly less skilled players wanted to show off/taunt the expert players of past of their "AAA" grades on scores that would not have been such in previous mixes.

So, Supernova 2 is 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 view, it was DDR, but there wasn't any kind of music hooks or familiar music to them to draw them in. By this point, Namco had the crowd-getter tactic all worked out and were constantly loading their "Taiko no Tatsujin" games featuring well known (to the locals) music that would usually turn heads whenever they were played. On the flip side, although people wouldn't say they hated the music in DDR, there just wasn't the recognition factor that was there with Namco's line. DDR used to have this same effect, but the remixes of popular tunes and licenses from the Dancemania albums were not what the newest mix used. For the gamers themselves, in terms of music, the Konami original tunes were where "it was all at" by this time anyways.

The next issue that struck the gamers themselves is the difficulty change. 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. (or ones that focused mostly 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 set. Paranoia Hades, because Konami hates you why was there 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 you were doing a rudimentary step pattern almost regardless of music. When the "basic" chart is more difficult than the average song on "difficult", none of the players on "basic" are going to play that song when they could just play something else on "standard" difficulty anyways that would probably be more enjoyable for them.

In terms of difficulty in general, even the expert players felt that Konami was trying to pay more attention to the overseas opinions/wants and ramp up the difficulty. The problem is that with the exception of a handful of players in the country, DDR gamers didn't want the charts to go "ExTrEmE" in terms of difficulty and gimmicks (e.g. all of the BPM stops in Pluto, which gamers felt was a "been there, done that" gimmick from "Chaos" in 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.

Finally, one last noted gripe from many players was the colour scheme. Many thought the visuals were too busy and distracting. If the player used the "Note" arrow skin, (that would make all the arrows change to a specific colour depending on where in the beat it landed) there would always be one of the random colour schemes for the game stage that would blend with one of the arrow colors.



Some of the BG animation movies also had difficult-to-see times. I hope you noticed the blue arrow coming up on the left

None of this would deter from the initial rush of players upon release, but these concerns would be rectified in the next mixes, though arguably at the expense of alienating the overseas players.

Within the more hardcore community, things were becoming more exciting.

First, you had the eAmuse records that were not always static since getting All Marvelous steps was almost unheard of except on the easiest songs, so records for songs could change from time to time with hard work. Fan run scoring sites were also updating themselves to include the new Marvelous judgment in their rankings as well.

Next, tournaments would make use of the Marvelous judgment in tournaments, though admittedly since the scoring system reflected that as well as put even weight on the score for each step, many tournaments came down to machines score to determine the winner in the end.



Moving on, one new addition to Supernova 2 over the eAmuse network that would make a splash was the “Zukin Wars”. In this event, all players registered on the eAmuse network were assigned to one of three teams: red, yellow, or green. During the course of each of the 4 “episodes” that would last around 3 weeks per, in addition to the team color being displayed in your regular results screens, on the final stage a



Maybe the most memorable event from SN2

condition is displayed where, if you successfully complete it, you get a number (random single digit) added to the number of “dark dancers” you have defeated. (The random number of dark dancers “attacking” and condition for victory are displayed before the song selection wheel is displayed on the final stage)

At the end of the event, the team with the most “dark dancers” defeated will get one of the song unlocks early, though players on other teams that have a high enough score would also get that song unlocked as well. This is perhaps the best remembered event from Supernova 2. This was something new and unique from the usual Internet Rankings, and the conditions were not so difficult and thus even casual gamers could contribute to their team. Players didn’t have to be godly at the game to participate and win. This would be 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, so initially people thought the red team would automatically dominate all, but in the end, they only “won” one of the four events. Mind you, many of them played so much that they would get the unlocks anyways because of the raw number of “dark dancers” they had defeated.

The new songs over eAmuse from time to time were nice touches. DDR would start to get stale to the players by the time the next mix was released at the end of 2008, but for now, until the end of 2007, everything is 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 fact would play out more in 2008.

With the arrival of 2008 there would mark a decrease in Supernova 2 machines. Not everywhere, of course, but only places with a regular core crowd and/or arcades with no other competition in the local area (that also see regular crowds) were safe. The hardcore players of the era would continue to try and best each others eAmuse records on songs and courses, and otherwise regular players would continue to pump



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

money into the machine, but throughout Tokyo, machines in lesser frequented arcades started to disappear.

This did cause a bit of a panic among 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 would 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 wasn't *as* well received overall as with some of the earlier mixes (and got stale by the time 2008 was in full swing).

So it was with great joy that the next in the series, DDR X, was to be released around the end of the year, and better yet with new cabinets to boot. This time, the new cabinets would be a major upgrade from the hardware used in the past, including wide screen HD and amusing (though slightly silly) side panels with giant LED panels. For the next mix, the hopes were high that this new play experience would breathe life back into the DDR series.

Other than the experience on the new cabinet at the test locations was reported to feel more "immersive" (for lack of a better word), the only other thing Japanese gamers 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 is to multiply the rating by 1.5. The rating might then be adjusted down or up a level or two depending on other factors of the chart that couldn't be expressed as simply in a 1-10 scale. There wasn't much else said on this, though it did help sort out the difficulty ratings slightly more.

Another major change was the introduction of the "shock" arrow in which the player has to not be standing on any of the arrows when it scrolls by. By this time, players were aware of "mines" from other music game series abroad (and even with the obscure Dance 86.4 game by Konami that used them), so this was seen as a slightly dumbed down version since shock arrows could only cover the whole stage instead of just part of it.



The only other game from Konami to have "mines" up to that point was Dance 86.4

Opinions in general were mostly neutral though they would prove extremely annoying to players on certain step charts depending on how close they were to other steps (being too close would sometimes result 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 mod in 0.5x speed increments up to 8x speed (starting from 1x speed). This was a welcome addition as there were cases in previous mixes where the limited number of

speed modifiers would make a song either too slow or too fast for a player with no nice medium between the two. There has been random “what if” talk since then about 0.25x speed increments but nobody seems to think it is really necessary at that level of detail. Another “what if” was the “CMOD”. This modifier was used in PC simulators and similar dance games abroad as a “Constant” speed modifier that would keep a song at a constant scrolling BPM throughout regardless of BPM stops or changes in the song (dynamically modifying the spacing between the arrows to match the BPM as necessary). Although the local players are aware of that scores counted with such a modifier are looked down upon, it might be nice to see, even if only to help learn a tricky part of a song involving 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 were a collage of various other songs in a longer song. The reactions were mostly neutral on this for the same reasons the long version songs in 5<sup>th</sup> mix were “nice, but I’m not using 2 of my 3 song choices to play it” nice. Although none of these X-Mix songs would break the top 30 most selected songs on either local machines or the eAmuse network, they would still see some traffic. Musically though, they were generally liked and it was amusing at first for gamers to pick out which songs were used. 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 were surprised to find that people were complaining about the announcer in the game, and even deducting points/score from a review point specifically for that reason. Even online, the announcer itself was a moot voice in the background. Yes, during quiet songs, a sudden outburst from the announcer would annoy players, but that has always been the case, not specific to any one announcer. The only gripe which in actuality wasn't really a gripe at all was that the English voice had a thick native English accent when speaking the Japanese phrases in the game. It wasn't a complaint, just something "cute" that was part of the game.

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

Amusingly, in the late fall just before the release of DDRX, a small arcade known as "World Game Circus" would open up and host a number of foreign arcade games, including the series "In The Groove" and "Pump It Up" as well as other games from Korea such as DJMax Technika. Many of the music game fans around Tokyo would go to visit within the next year.



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

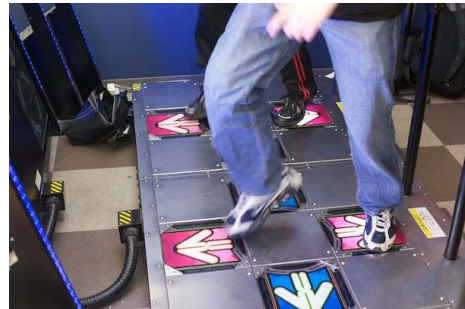


DJ Max Technika, long before a localized version would find its way to Japan



## 2009

So as the new year rolled in, DDRX was a very hot item. Even arcades with multiple machines (2, 3 or even 4) would have long queues of players waiting for their turn. In fact, the lineups wouldn't begin to die down from the initial popularity phase for 2 months (case by case based on location).



A nice shiny new stage for the latest mix of DDR

This all went on despite a few bugs with the game at launch. Although they would be 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.



Where is your God now?

Yes, the two bugs were annoying, (one would cause a random sync/speed mismatch between the scrolling speed and the song itself, and the other would cause lag and



Some people really like glitches. HADOUKEN!

make arrows randomly appear/disappear) but for whatever reason, the players believed that a patch would be out relatively quickly to fix it, so they were going to enjoy it while they could. A similar phenomenon would occur



with X2 and the “Voltage” meter of the players “My Groove Radar” being erroneously calculated (when entering a specific rival code “0000-0001”) such that the graph would spike off the screen.

One thing that did happen that was viewed as good for the series was the return of the casual gamer to DDR. Although it would never be anywhere near the golden days of 3rd mix where the DDR groups were everywhere and DDR was still being projected into the mainstream, the casual gamers would end up forming their own circles of "DDR friends".

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, an addition released soon after launch would allow players to see the progress in score from their rivals during the song. Also, although the newer cabinets were a welcome addition (and helped replenish some of 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).

Furthermore, a subtle change this time around would be the ability for the player to change the speed modifier during gameplay (at the beginning of the song). This was actually not known as widespread as I thought, and was utilized mostly by the hardcore crowd or at least the more serious gamers either during challenge courses (where different songs have

different BPMs back to back), or when mistakenly selecting a song at a speed modifier too fast. During the test location version, the speed modifier change was allowed throughout the whole song, but it was axed for the final build. Responses to this were pretty neutral overall in the sense that although in theory it would be great to change speeds through the song if the BPM changed by quite a bit, you would need someone else coordinating the effort since you most likely wouldn't have time to change it yourself during play, it would be clumsy, etc. Also, there was a concern 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 read.

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 in the west. However, playing flat footed was now seen more among the players.

It cannot be stated enough that the more hardcore fans of the series would drop an incredible amount of money into this entry in the series. From Konami's own site, it lists the number of "Marvelous" steps per player in addition to the average number of



10 people that played DDRX put enough money combined into the machine to buy one of these

"Marvelous" steps per game. Using this data, we can estimate just how much players have spent on the game. Using the average of 100 yen per game, the top 10 players alone (based on raw number of Marvelous steps) would put a shocking \$42,000 US equivalent into the machine by the time the next game in the series was released.

Of more interest though, was how even though all of the unlocked content in the game was finally fully available after 10 months, the game itself continued to draw large crowds, including DDR arcade "groups" that would usually show up for the evenings and on weekends.



Crowds still lineup to play DDRX right up until the next in the series is released.

Right up until the release of DDR X2, the game was still drawing crowds of both the casual and the hardcore. Even freestyle dance "performances" of days gone by have been making the occasional appearance now.

During the first 10 months of the game's life cycle, there would be periodic updates over the eAmuse network to keep the game fresh. For the more hardcore players, the eAmuse records would store the player's personal best score, machine best score, and eAmuse best score per song. Even if the eAmuse record was out of reach, players could still shoot for the local machine records.

It was clear that the Japanese gamers got what they wanted from this mix. Although word would reach the local gamers about the troubles with the overseas versions (including shoddy cabinet builds), within Japan, 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 now made them much more difficult (or just different) from playing on the mix on which they 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 the either lesser skilled players or players just wanting a nice, easy stepchart were making all the charts that people wanted to play (or in a worst case scenario, they and their friends played the same edit data to no end just to get it up on the weekly best list). Only after about a year after DDR X was out did harder step charts start to emerge.

From a social point of view, up until this mix, Japanese gamers "finished" with the current mix would sometimes venture out to seek out the older/rarer mixes. This wasn't done nearly as much now primarily due to the new features (screen filtering, fixed quantization). Additionally, although many of the music game fans in the Tokyo area would visit the "World Game Circus" arcade mentioned in the last chapter/year, 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. (With the exception that DJ Max Technika would be localized and released in Japan at the end of 2010). Although foreign music game fans visiting Japan would sometimes ask where the nearest "In The Groove" and "Pump it Up" cabinets are, at least there was the one arcade in Japan that could be cited, despite the fact most of the dance game fans were satisfied with DDRX.

Communication with overseas communities would be very limited and in most cases indirect. One player living in Taiwan would gain mass recognition for his constant barrage of various DDR-related videos, though many gamers were just too shy or distant to try and contact him directly. Of course, lack of English ability plays a part as well.

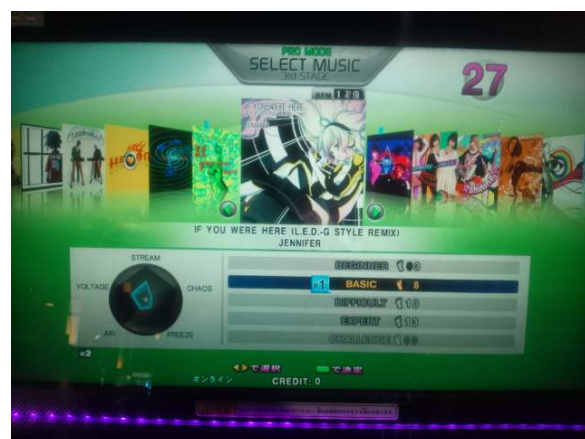


# 2010

As 2010 rolls in, DDRX is still getting lots of traffic as mentioned in the previous year/chapter. Even though all of the unlockable content had been made freely selectable by this point, the crowds would continue to pump money into the game in addition to forming their own small DDR circles of friends (as well as indirectly through the eAmuse rival list)

Even as DDR X was continuing to draw crowds, the next in the series, X2 was announced. There was some skepticism over the musical direction since there was a change in the music director for the series and what they could add to X. At the test location version, the biggest shock turned out to be the interface itself.

The new "look and feel" of X2 was reminiscent of the iTunes Cover Flow interface. Players couldn't get the whole iPod feeling out of their heads. This in itself wouldn't be so bad, though the interface also had a tendency to lag



Cover Flow, coming to an iPod...er, arcade DDR near you

between screens. Players in general are slightly impatient to begin with, (e.g. when one player finishes their game, they should have their bags and

everything else off the stage and out of there as the game ends so the next player can start) so delay in the interface will aggravate the players slightly.

One other point that gamers noted was that either the polling system (how the game determines timing of the player's steps) and synching was changed since songs now feel a bit different to play in terms of scoring. This may be a moot point though, since the hardcore gamers that had noticed such things would have probably compensated for a new quantization/polling/sync of the songs anyways regardless of how it was implemented.

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



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

Technika would see a localized release late this year.

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



be online discussion and campaigns to get either a home version of X2 or at least a soundtrack of the music.

The eAmuse system would be used slightly different in this mix, though one of the most immediately noticeable changes was that the player scores from DDRX was not carried over to X2. This caused initial frustration among the players since some had spent a significant amount of time and/or money to get some of their scores. In retrospect, part of the unlock system in X2 would require the player to play songs from the previous mix "folders" in the game, so carrying over scores would have had the effect of rushing unlocks.

In this mix, there were now time-based unlocks, either by specific dates, time or based on special events. This would turn out to lure players on specific dates/times just to get some of the unlock content. It was a small change, but it did tend to shape the times and dates when some gamers played.

There were also event-based unlocks in which a certain game "event" would play out after normal play (match the cards, throw a character through planets). These events would usually run a month or so and gave ample time for the players to get all of the event based unlocks. Even if the player did not get all of the unlocks, they would be unlocked as freely selectable content months later (with some exceptions, though that wouldn't be just a DDR or Konami thing, it is common in Japan for limited time events to run,

and if you didn't claim your prize or get out to buy a certain limited time product within the time frame of the event, you would never get it)

One thing of note with the unlocks was the player was more in control of unlocking certain content. This kind of "at your own pace" method of unlocking certain songs was well viewed since not every player could take time out of their schedule at specific dates/times just to get a new song or character/accessory.



Use a dance stage to catch and throw a character through planets to win prizes?

Sure, why not?

Over the course of the year, new unlocks would continue to be revealed, even surpassing the total number of unlocks for DDR X. The content was always perceived to be kept fresh, and apart from some smaller issues, most gamers were happy with this new mix.

There were still the casual gamers and even freestyle performers this time around. It is arguable if this mix drew more than X or the other way around, but the community did continue to thrive right to the end of 2010.

Tournaments are happening among the regular players of all skill levels. Tournaments at this point are still mostly single elimination, and there are

no cash prizes due to the gambling laws in Japan. This year would be a first for tournaments, though. This time, players from across the country, especially the more well known skilled players, paid transportation out of their own pockets to enter a tournament



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

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, and especially for the players way out in Hokkaido or the Kansai regions, for whom that is a huge expense to bear for a social gathering.

On that note, a number of the local players would start to gain recognition outside of Japan. Most notable was the player "Brosoni" and to a lesser extent his immediate friends. During the DDR X days, Brosoni's small cell phone picture of an AAA (Perfect Full Combo) on Fascination Maxx would turn a few heads, though only among a very small percentage of the overseas fan base. However this time he had full HD videos put up of his accomplishments. The videos were impressive and looked great. Brosoni was slightly aware of his gaining popularity overseas, though was still self-conscious about how to get in touch with them (and communicate) though.

So, at the end of 2010, the community lives on and you could say it even thrives. The newest mix at this time, X2 is drawing a lot of gamers (both casual and hardcore, scorers and performers) and there are events and content unlocks to keep things fresh in addition to the player-run tournaments going on from time to time. Although there are no new mixes of DDR announced at this time and no home version planned, the soundtrack for DDR X2 is to be released early in the next year, so players still have something to look for on the horizon.



Tournaments among the hardcore players still thrive in 2010

# Epilogue

I realize that trying to give any kind of generalization of how an entire gaming subculture behaves is bound to be met by exceptions and regions where certain expressions and behaviours may not exactly match those written in this essay. It is my hope that the general trends as noticed from myself and others in this fairly tight-knit community help give an indication as to where the behaviours and mindsets originate as well as explain the gradual changes and divergences between not only different groups of games within the local Japanese DDR subculture, but between them and communities overseas as well.

At the time of this essay, the DDR scene is still thriving in comparison to a few periods of downtime within the community. The game and the players may not be in the foreground of mainstream popularity like when the series first came out, but there are both casual and hardcore gamers still playing and enjoying the game series.

The series has become a significant part of my life over the past 12 years, and with what I think is a unique standpoint on this DDR “community”, I’d like to express what I and my friends within this community have experienced (and can convey) not only for my own recollection and memories, but for others with an interest in the game and the players behind it.

# Addendum

As I have written and revised this work several times, some questions from myself and others started to arise such as “What ever happened to so-and-so?” “What did people think of the American scene?” and the like. In this last section I would like to address a few of these points.

One thing that I am saying about the survival of game series in general is that regardless of how hardcore the “hardcore” fan base of a game series is, it cannot survive without a steady influx of newcomers. I have seen first hand some of the hardcore crowd discouraging newcomers and stagnating a series (for a while) with Beatmania IIDX, and it does seem discouraging to perceive this behaviour with 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. One noticeable point of some of the overseas communities from this side of the Pacific is that instead of encouraging and welcoming newcomers into the fold, the remaining fans of various music game series seem to fall into a kind of pit of self-loathing and shun outsiders all the while bemoaning how “dead” the scene has become.

On a related note, although I mentioned it earlier on in the essay, the western idea of what makes a fun or good chart differs quite a bit from that perception in Japan. I am a bit biased towards the Japanese side myself,

but I can see the differences. Whereas the Japanese players seem to treat each step chart like a puzzle in that sometimes non-intuitive planning/foot placement/etc. is required to perfect it, the western audience seems to shun such “gimmicks” (as it is put) in favour of charts that lack these and are sometimes more geared towards foot speed and stamina. On the other hand, the Japanese players (in general, there are some notable exceptions) are not such a fan of long stamina draining charts. With Konami focusing on the Asian market, the charts and songs they use appeal to their intended audience, but alienate the overseas crowds. There are also other issues with build quality of the overseas machines that ruin the experience, but that is another story.

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 charts not even being played by most of the gamers (except on perhaps the lower difficulty settings). Both sides seem to have the opinion the licensed songs were somewhat lacking, though. Furthermore, although DDRX (and X2 to a similar or lesser degree) were huge successes in Japan compared to some of the previous entries in the series, poor build construction, lack of eAmuse support, and general taste differences in music/charts led to a generally poor reception of both mixes.

This almost comes off as black and white in terms of opinions in Japan and overseas in some cases. One could take a look at a chart with lots of “crossovers” and “double steps” and bet that Japanese players will just deal with it, and by the same token bet that you’ll get cries of “unfun” and “gimmicky” from the overseas crowd. Reverse the sides if you talk about extremely fast and/or hard charts where stamina is a large factor in passing the song let alone doing well on it. These are some exaggerated examples and there are exceptions anyways, but it helps illustrate the contrast of opinions.

To expand the scope to include custom/user created step charts, the entire scene and how the custom content is viewed seems different as well. Step charts for use on a DDR machine in Japan are 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/experienced players made into a series of “lesson” step charts gradually building in difficulty. There aren’t usually mass collectives of all these edits online and instead custom step charts are stored and shared on arcade machines and over the eAmuse network (with some players uploading data files on their personal blog).

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 can't understand English well at all may only be interested in the custom simfiles, but when they look at/translate the comments and opinions on these simfiles, the locals think it is great that such things exists, but since what constitutes a "good" song or chart is subjective (barring technical issues or errors), it comes off as a bit arrogant for some 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, as opposed to something like "I don't like this chart/song because..." One comment I received on the social networking site Mixi sort of illustrates this (translated):

*"Wait, so he makes custom step charts and then says other's work is 'stupid' just because it isn't something he would do, and then he expects to be \*respected\* for this?"*

This isn't the view on everyone, mind you, but these kinds of attitudes stick out the most (the vocal minority, if you will). To be fair, a number of the locals do enjoy taking a peek at what is considered popular in the custom simfile community on their PCs with Stepmania, though tastes vary as I have probably already hammered in several times over the span of this writing and goes without saying.

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 as well 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. Yasu still plays DDR once in a while and can still AAA 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 filmed 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. He also films random freestyle performances and hosts them on YouTube these days.

# Glossary

**AAA** : The highest possible score for a single song, consisting of all Perfect steps. In later mixes, AAA alone is defined to be  $\geq 99\%$  of the maximum score. In the later mixes, PFC and MFC are used to denote what would be considered a traditional “AAA”.

**Beatmania** : Konami’s earliest Bemani music game series.

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

**BPM** : Beats Per Minute. In the context of this essay, 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 is listed in order of increasing difficulty from top to bottom.

—	→	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.

**Great (Judgment)** : Refers to the step judgment one below “Perfect”. Getting even one of these makes it impossible to receive a grade of “AAA” on a song in older mixes

(“PFC”/“MFC” in later mixes).

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

**IR** – Internet Ranking, a limited time event where 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 consisting of all Marvelous steps. Refer to **AAA**

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

**PERFECT (Judgment)** : Until later mixes of DDR, the highest single judgment grade per step. This would be 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.

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

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