Nearly four decades after they disbanded for good, the Beatles are back, but on a digital stage.

Yesterday, Apple Corps Ltd., the music group's company, disclosed an agreement to license Beatles music for a forthcoming video game by Harmonix Music Systems of Cambridge, creators of the hit games Guitar Hero and Rock Band.

The Beatles - Paul McCartney, Ringo Starr, and the late John Lennon and George Harrison - formed perhaps the most popular and influential musical group of the past century. The band's albums have sold more than a billion physical copies worldwide.

Today many consumers purchase music, including the solo recordings of all four Beatles, as digital downloads from the Internet. But Apple Corps has refused so far to license digital downloads of the Beatles' albums. Last year, reports surfaced that EMI was trying to broker a deal to sell Beatles songs through iTunes, the online music store owned by US computer maker Apple Inc. McCartney was quoted in the trade magazine Billboard as saying the
group's music would likely begin to be sold online in 2008. However, Apple Corps chief executive Jeff Jones said yesterday the company has no current plans to sell songs through Internet stores.

"It's hard for me to imagine that at this point, the negotiation is about something other than just price," said digital copyright specialist Wendy Seltzer, a fellow with the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University. A spokesman for Apple Inc. declined to comment, and representatives of Apple Corps and EMI could not be reached for comment.

The Beatles are far from the first popular musicians to offer digital versions of their songs through video music games. The renowned heavy metal band Metallica recently released its latest album in a version that could be downloaded and played inside a version of the Guitar Hero game, and the band AC/DC has issued a special collection of hit songs for the new version of Rock Band. "We've seen some bands like Mötley Crüe and some others put new material in the game first because there's a growing audience for the games," said Mike McGuire, an online-music analyst for the market research firm Gartner Inc. in Stamford, Conn. "What you have to do all the time is go where the audience is."

Harmonix pioneered the modern video music game. Players use controllers shaped like guitars, microphones, and drum kits that plug into a video game console. By watching visual cues on their television screen, nonmusicians can become virtual band members, playing along with their favorite songs. Harmonix's first such game, Guitar Hero, has sold 23 million units worldwide over the past three years. However, the franchise is now produced by competitor Activision Blizzard Inc.

Harmonix, now owned by media conglomerate Viacom Inc., last year created a music video game, Rock Band, which has sold more than 4 million units and spawned a recently released sequel, Rock Band 2.

The new Beatles game, to be released in time for the 2009 holiday shopping season, will present a broad selection of the group's tunes, from their earliest performances in 1960 to the band's breakup in 1970. The two surviving Beatles, along with Lennon's widow, issued statements praising the deal. "It's cool," said Yoko Ono Lennon. "I love it and hope it will keep inspiring and encouraging the young generation for many decades."

McCartney called the game "a fun idea which broadens the appeal of The Beatles and their music." The statement also quoted Starr as saying, "Let the games commence."

Rock Band fans echoed that sentiment. "That's awesome," said Suzanne Nizza, 23, a Harvard University graduate student who relaxes by playing Rock Band. "One of the problems with Rock Band is a lot of the songs aren't very well known to a lot of people . . . but everybody knows Beatles songs, so a lot more people will want to play."

The news also captivated Joe Cheung, 27, of Somerville. "I've been thinking about this Beatles thing all day," said Cheung, a high school science teacher who peeked at video game blog updates and excerpts from yesterday's Harmonix conference call between classes.

Cha-Chi Loprete, 51, a lifelong Beatles fan who hosts the weekly program "Breakfast with the Beatles" on Boston radio station WZLX, believes that new leadership at Apple Corps may have opened the door to the video game project.
Loprete noted that Jones, a former Columbia Records executive, took over as chief executive at Apple Corps in 2007, replacing longtime chief Neil Aspinall, who died in March 2008. "I think Neil was kind of old school," said Loprete. "But I think with Jeff Jones at the helm now, he'll look at new ways to market the Beatles."

Loprete is optimistic that Jones will complete a deal to sell the group's songs online, predicting that will unleash a Beatles renaissance.

"They're going to be the number one digitally downloaded band in the world," he said. "It's going to be a real phenomenon, much like it was in '64 when they held the top five slots in the Billboard charts."

Several newspapers reported yesterday that Harmonix would reveal a new Beatles game. Harmonix chief executive Alex Rigopulos said the game would be an entirely original product. "This game is not just a Rock Band expansion pack," said Rigopulos. "We want to take players on a sort of experiential journey through the band's imagery and ideas and visions as they evolved over their time together."

Greg LoPiccolo, vice president of product development at Harmonix, said the game maker has been working on the deal for 17 months. "One of the things that was a prerequisite was that we had to coalesce around a vision of what the product would be before Apple and the Beatles would sign on," LoPiccolo said. But he declined to describe the game, or reveal how many Beatles songs were licensed by Harmonix.

Billy Pidgeon, a video game industry analyst for IDC Corp., said the deal will help Apple Corps introduce millions of young gamers to the music that inspired their parents. "It's really good for the record companies, because a younger generation is getting introduced to the classic back catalogs," he said, adding that at the same time, Harmonix gets an exclusive relationship with the most revered rock band of all time. With the Beatles on board, Pidgeon said, "some people will be more likely to buy Rock Band even if they have Guitar Hero."

Hiawatha Bray can be reached at bray@globe.com. Nicole C. Wong can be reach at nwong@globe.com. Michael Warshaw of the Globe staff contributed to this report.

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