



Fuser and the Harmonix Academy of Music

The Boston studio continues to pass on their musical passion to players, despite a stifling campaign mode.

There's a special kind of joy and satisfaction that rhythm games deliver that's rarely found in other genres. A connection between the player and the music can be so easily built through some buttons pressed to the beat – it's that connection that gets me head banging and forgetting about points and streaks. Harmonix have always known this, but their latest release stumbles the most when the points try to matter.

Fuser once again taps into the excitement of being a part of the live music experience. You're a DJ in front of a thousands-large crowd, mixing the drums, bass, melody and vocals of a slew of popular tracks into something that'll get 'em dancing. Will the vocals to In Da Club put to Party Rock Anthem's drums be a mess? Maybe! But DJing isn't about what should make sense – it rewards the inventive; those who see what others don't; those who try All Star's vocals with everything.

This core is effortless, and its array of tools and options means beginners and aficionados alike can pick up the controller and immediately make a compelling mix. It's genuinely thrilling to hear tracks decades or genres apart just...click. Before you know it, you're pumping your hand in the air to a virtual crowd while Dolly Parton sings over The Clash's drums. You've made something new, and it's easy to lose yourself in the music.

Then suddenly, a pop-up tells you some dude in the crowd wants to hear a song from the 70s. You're yanked out of the audio-induced trance in order to furiously flick through your list of tracks. You might get mixed up or struggle to read the small text in time and end up missing the request, breaking the poor guy's heart. With that, your crowd metre goes down alongside a wave of boos.

How could they possibly boo Dolly?



Tough Crowds

The problem with Fuser is that, ironically, the method it uses to teach you its extensive palette of tools is its most confining mode: the campaign.

Like previous Harmonix games, it has you moving from venue to venue, playing to different crowds. Each session introduces you to one of its many concepts and skills in these 10-15 minute mixes; things like fading tracks in and out, or how to play the game's pre-programmed instruments. This steady pace is good because there's an awful lot to take in, and they can all have a big impact on the sound of mixes.

But while you're experimenting with these tools, Fuser suddenly breaks out into a video game. As mentioned, the crowd will frequently request certain songs or instruments be added. There are also key tasks to complete found on the right of the screen, things like only having two disks active or using newly-acquired skills. If requests or tasks aren't fulfilled, your final star rating will take a hit. And this is the crux of the issues I have with Fuser: the game gets in the way of the fun. Revelling in the hot new track you literally just invented isn't

“ It's intrusive to think about scoring in a game that's trying to encourage exploration and creativity. ”

the intended way to play. Aside from the aforementioned tasks and requests, the game scores you on how many 'actions' you complete well in a mix. Drop a bass track on the beat? Points for you. Isolate a track on the beat, even if it sounds awkward to your human ears? More points. Adding a new track to your mix every bar, like an 8 year-old deciding on a ringtone? That's a big points payday.

It's inelegant, at best. At worst, it drives you out of your creative groove for the sake of stars and unlocks (I'll get to those later). One argument for these mechanics could be to drive you out of comfort zones, but it's demoralising to do everything the game asks and still get only three - or even two! - stars. I've rarely reached five stars, and not because I'm being frugal with my mixes or 'staying within my comfort zone'.

To add an extra layer of frustration, going back to old stages in the hopes of getting those extra stars means replaying tutorial sections. Just let me practice and play! It'd be easy

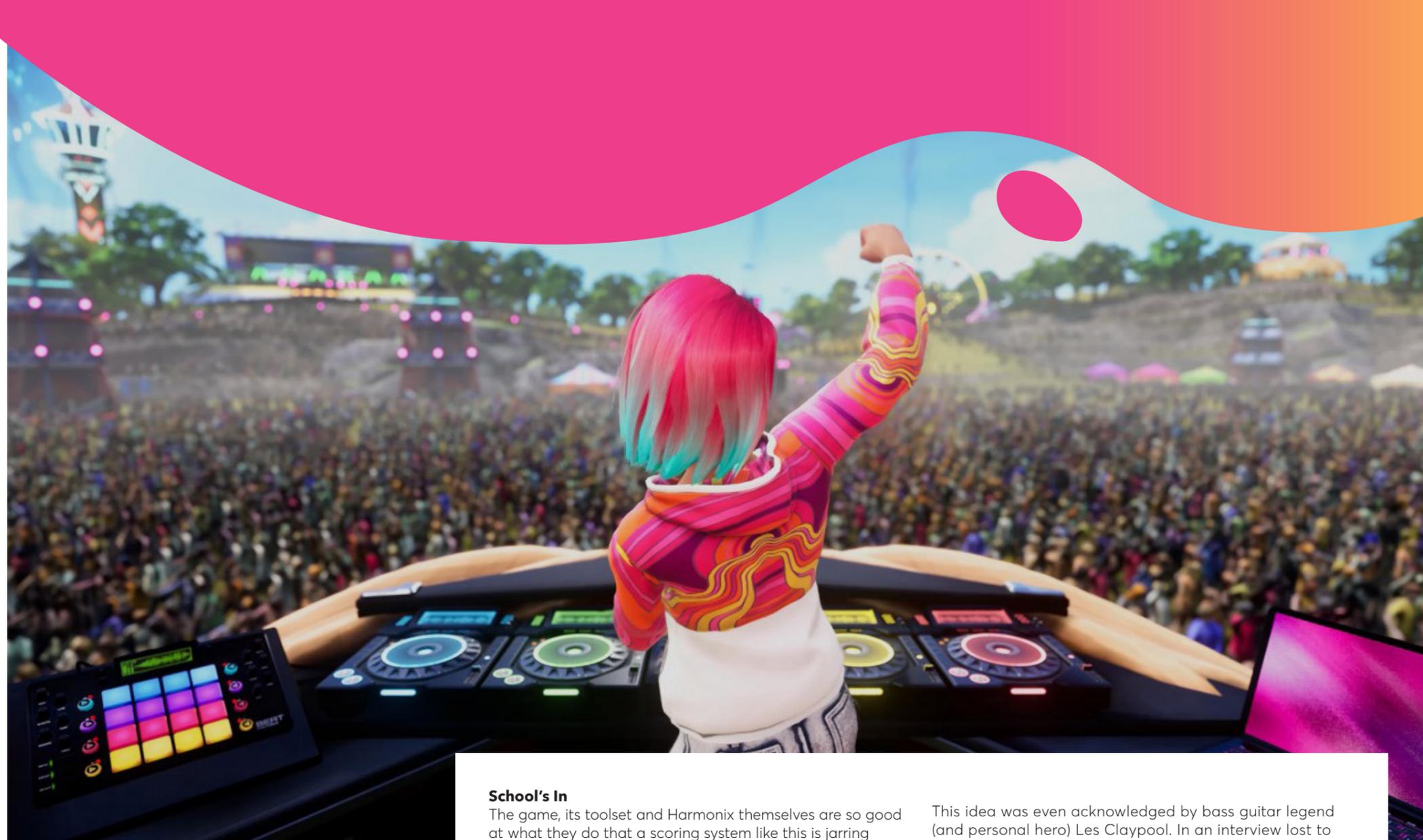
to downplay these speed bumps, since the game does have a freestyle mode to let you loose with everything.

However you need that campaign to learn the tool set. It's like going to school: what you're

taught is (sometimes) important, but the way you're tested on them is less than ideal. Even on a micro level things can get judged poorly in the campaign. Take the previously mentioned isolate tool; when you're scored on its use, you have to isolate the entire bar of music, not just the part that often sounds best. The robots with clipboards in the crowd aren't going to like it if you only isolate the 'maybe' in the Call Me Maybe, even if your instincts tell you that it'd make the beat work.

But you have to, because you need those stars to get levels. And you need those levels to get song money, to buy new songs. In the year of Our Lord 2020, we're still unlocking songs in a rhythm game - the last time I remember this unique brand of frustration was fumbling with cheat codes on Lego Rock Band while my friends shook me by the shoulders, desperate to play Sum 41. I thought those days were past us.

Whoa a title totally could go right here ▲
A short pull out quote could go here or something



School's In

The game, its toolset and Harmonix themselves are so good at what they do that a scoring system like this is jarring to experience. Being judged like this in Fuser reminded me of the subtle genius of Harmonix's back catalogue. What separates Harmonix's creations from the vast majority of rhythm games are that they make you think about the act of making music. Before guitars and heroes were involved,

Frequency and Amplitude had players playing bass, lead, drums and other tracks by flitting between them. The philosophy of providing more than just boxes to hit on time was there before the Age of Plastic Instruments.

Making music goes beyond learning music theory or picking apart songs; playing along as a Guitar Hero with a simulated band gives you an idea of having other musicians rely on you. That might sound hyperbolic, but how many of you felt something other than "oh no, my score!" when you futzed up playing a song? The song sounded worse because you played your part wrong, and that feels realistically crappy. Play well and nail that solo, though, and the whole song - not just your part - comes together beautifully. It's baby's first experience of musicianship, but it has meaning.

This idea was even acknowledged by bass guitar legend (and personal hero) Les Claypool. In an interview lost to time, he said he'd go against his videogame ban to buy a PS2 and Guitar Hero II, which featured his band Primus's John the Fisherman. He said he'd let his kids play it so they could understand how they'd fit in a band "sonically". That's a) a cool word and b) an important concept for young musicians to understand. Other less-fun legends, like Led Zeppelin's Jimmy Page, think it's more important to get hands-on time with real instruments or see the games as distractions, but surely the first step is to simply think of music and playing in a band as an approachable thing? There's value in experiencing a simulation that's safe and fun, but it's easy to dunk on plastic guitars and yell "Just learn an instrument!" as a septuagenarian millionaire guitarist. ▶



That ethos of subtle education would stick with Harmonix after the Guitar Hero name was lost to Neversoft. The Rock Band series had you and your friends perform - and be 'sonically' responsible for - each instrument. On an individual level, drummers in Rock Band 2 could hone their craft in a handful of practice modes, letting you attempt complex fills and beats. And Rock Band 3 just straight-up gave you a keyboard, a six-string guitar and tablature to songs. It kinda lost its 'learning without realising' M.O. here, but they stuck to their ethos when the genre was collapsing in on itself.

“ It's always been about the joy of making music, less so about playing a game. ”

I think this is why I've always been drawn to their games; for me rhythm games aren't about the points, or the bad, good or perfect notes, just the notes.

The Taiko series is great, but you're playing over the theme to Dragonball Z; In Rock Band you are playing Jack White's guitar parts. It doesn't take much of a leap to start thinking about what he's playing and why. Harmonix fosters those thoughts in players, gently ushering those who might not realise their musical inclinations into thinking deeper about songs. It's about gently breathing life into those embers and seeing what happens.

This tradition of approachability is continued in Fuser. I'll shamefully admit that I don't recognise 95% of the 2010s artists in the game, but I've found myself listening to a playlist of them. I'm mentally picking apart tracks, memorising tempos and considering potential mixes. I'm thinking about what they'd sound like slowed down, pitched down, majored, minored and everything in between. I'm thinking like what I (maybe naively) assume a DJ thinks like. Much like how slamming out a bar or two of freestyle drums before a song in Rock Band built a mental bridge between plastic drums and real drums, figuring out the possibilities for those husky Post Malone vocals has me thinking about music in a new way.

It's magic. It turns a video game into a vector for musicianship. Not everyone will want to make their own music, but they'll have a new appreciation for the skill and artistry that goes into the songs. It's Fuser's unsung victory - one moment you're laughing after combining Smash Mouth with DMX, but then suddenly it just works. But...if this oil is mixing with this water, what other possibilities are there? I have other dumb-but-possibly-good ideas - could my dumb ass be a DJ? And then you get three stars, because you were lost in your mix and didn't notice that one guy in the crowd asking for Shania Twain.

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**Encore:
Playing the Game**
Playing through Fuser's bumpy campaign has reminded me of just how natural the design of Guitar Hero and Rock Band were in ushering its audience towards a deeper interest in music. It's easy to think of games like Music 2000 and Rocksmith as 'real' music-making and education games, but these tend to cater to those with an established interest in music. The Rock Band series gave general audiences a fun game to play before they bite 'em with the music bug. And as I - and so many others - can attest to, those games are excellent; Rock Band 4 is still being supported to this day.

It's exciting to think about just where expert Fuser players might go. Will they turn to the DJing and remixing world, or be satisfied with mastering the options offered in the game? Both will provide the world with some excellent music, of course. In the meantime, I guess I'll power through these campaign missions, settling for three stars and slowly expanding my list of songs.

It's fine, though, because it's not about scores or levels - It's about the music.

