



# Fuser: Remixing the Rhythm Game

How Harmonix's beat juggling romp empowers players through creativity over challenge



Jacob Heayes · Follow

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**I**t has been eleven years since I first laid hands onto a *DJ Hero* turntable. A huge swathe of my formative years are reflected through art I experienced at the time, but there's a specificity to the fondness I feel towards this strange slab of plastic, one that hasn't manifested since.

Rhythm games have always occupied a spacious region of my thoughts — one of the first games I remember falling in love with was Nintendo's own *Donkey Konga*. I discovered several cherished bands through imitating their greatest hits with imperfect peripherals: *Tubthumping* with those aforementioned bongos, *Paint it Black* with the iconic *Guitar Hero* bass, *Surfin' Bird* thanks to the array of cheesy chart-toppers in *Just Dance*. These titles tap into high-score chasing instincts that arcades depend on, hence why *DDR* dominated and *osu!* championships are still going strong to this day.



DJ Hero in action — crossfading and all.

*DJ Hero* was a little different. Whilst still attached to the enormously successful *Hero* brand of rhythm titles, developers FreeStyle Games

capitalised on the unique opportunities buried within this scene to create a daringly experimental mainstream music game. If anything, *DJ Hero* came a little too late, only ever getting two games before rhythm fatigue settled in and Activision unceremoniously killed off the entire brand.

Whilst *DJ* remained skill-dependent, every track was its own creation tailor-made for the game, mixing together two hits into an incredible new sound. Players wouldn't just be tapping buttons to the beat. *DJ Hero* demanded crossfading, scratching, rewinding and even some minor sampling skills. Expanded on in its sequel, red zones in tracks would let players insert either chosen sound effects or custom loops taken from the tune in question. *DJ Hero* signalled towards an alternative rhythm title; a game focused on creation rather than imitation.

I appreciate it has taken several paragraphs to even introduce *Fuser* but it was this thought, one buried in my head for a decade, that Harmonix adopted as the core design principle for their own DJ experience. Whereas the vast majority of rhythm games require perfection, *Fuser* asks for no such thing. There is a form of scoring but no skill barrier to overcome. There are no difficulty options or anything resembling beatmaps. These might sound like mortal sins for genre purists but in removing these ludological barriers, *Fuser* actually comes closest to capturing the joys of music than any other recent attempt.



Let the festival begin.

Presenting players with a traditional setlist, *Fuser's* core Freestyle mode lets you assemble your favourite tracks into a Crate that is effectively your inventory behind the turntables. Traditionally, individual tracks are the finished piece that the player is constantly aiming to recreate through perfect timing and co-ordination. In *Fuser*, each track is a building block to a final mosaic that is initially a complete unknown. This is a game about taking familiar sounds, breaking them apart into their sonic components and reconstructing them into a personal collage.

Taking notes from their innovative but unsuccessful card game *Dropmix*, Harmonix separate each track into four key ingredients: drums, bass, melody and vocals. These aren't always audibly consistent however; the melody in Pharrell Williams' *Happy* for instance is a vocal sample whilst the bass in *X Gon' Give It To Ya* is a thumping horn.

Crate-crafting (as I am hereby labelling the process) is a thrilling voyage into musical experimentation. Whilst most players will still gravitate to tracks they recognise or love at first, *Fuser* is more intent on altering your perspective of music from a single totality to an eclectic toolbox. I am not an avid listener of country music but I have used the guitar riff from *Mud on the Tires* in my mixes more times than I count. Why? It sounds great. When freestyling, *Fuser* is not so much about the player trying to conquer the game, but the player finding mixes that appease their own tastes. I have not found such deeply idiosyncratic and empowering design in the rhythm genre before, or really any other genre for that matter.



Resist the temptation to drop in Rick Astley. Please.

These idiosyncrasies are striking to the extent where *Fuser's* flaws are thrown into relief as a result. I have primarily discussed the Freestyle mode since that is where *Fuser* is allowed to let loose and accept its peculiarities, abandoning any progression or high-score chasing. However, there is a traditional 10-hour Campaign that not only unlocks several tracks and effects, but also sorely misunderstands its own strengths. In this mode, players travel around various festival stages and learn about *Fuser's*

mechanics, all from the guiding hands of quirky DJ mentors. In this regard, it serves as a handy tutorial in navigating the surprising depth on offer. When it resorts to traditional game design however, the collision of *Fuser's* values with that of its genre heritage is too violent to ignore.

Each set is rated on a five-star scale determined by challenges, timing of disc drops and crowd response. There's a variety of themes and pre-picked tracks in your Crate but *Fuser* still allows players some freedom in choosing their setlist — however I soon resorted to auto-filling my Crate throwing in an exciting element of challenge to otherwise repetitive levels. The issue arises from the challenges and erratic crowd requests. Harmless goals like “play a 1970s disc” or “cue some drums” turn into hellish management tasks, thanks to needless timers that constantly disrupt your chosen mix.



Fuser captures what it's truly like to be a DJ: being hounded by annoying requests.

For instance, certain tasks might need to be active for 10 seconds. If you *have* been playing that 1970s hip-hop track but only for 8 seconds? Too bad. Now you're stuck with a track you may not even have wanted without any points to show for it. Why not just ignore the goals? Well, that's always an option but *Fuser's* mind-numbing progression system ties XP to star ratings, with levelling as the only method to earn tokens that unlock new tracks. In short,

if you don't play ball, you'll be stuck with the same fifteen odd songs for eternity and *Fuser's* toolkit will start feeling crushingly familiar.

My constant yearning to return to Freestyle whilst slogging through the Campaign's restrictive checklist of tasks however brought *Fuser's* successes further into fruition. Through both completely capitalising on its awe-inspiring music technology and utterly failing to understand its originality simultaneously, *Fuser's* brilliance is transparent. You adore it when it's there and long for it when it's missing. Even better? That brilliance is not an unsolvable enigma that other development teams couldn't learn from. In allowing players to create rather than imitate, *Fuser* encapsulates the individual experiences that transcend art from materiality to memory. If you ask me, that's a fair bit better than a high score.

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