

## RockBand 2

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When Harmonix developed the original Guitar Hero back in 2005, they pretty much defined a genre. While music games had been around for a while, they'd invariably relied on the controller as the main game input. With the release of Guitar Hero came the peripheral that changed the series completely – a guitar controller that let players live out their fantasies of being a rock god.

After Harmonix was bought by MTV, they sought to redefine the genre again, this time with the release of Rock Band. No longer were you tied down to a single instrument, and no longer were you restricted to just 2 players at a time. 4 friends could get together and rock out to their hearts content, with 2 people on guitar, 1 guy slamming away on drums, and another wailing away on the microphone. It made for pretty much the perfect party game, but it wasn't without its flaws. The World Tour mode, pretty much the bread and butter of the game, was restricted to having multiple players on the same console. You couldn't play it alone, and you couldn't play it online either. You were left with a linear single player career, and having to make do with single song sets online with pals. Still, it didn't detract too much from what was an awesome experience, especially if you could get 4 players together. Now Harmonix are back again, and this time they're not attempting to define or redefine a genre, they're merely seeking to refine it into the ultimate music game, and they may well have succeeded. That game is Rock Band 2. Let's not get too far ahead of ourselves though. For those who perhaps aren't too familiar with the Rock Band/Guitar Hero style games, let me give you a brief introduction. You play each song with your chosen instrument, and as you do scrolling notes come down the screen towards you. When they pass the designated area, you must "play" that note, either by holding down the relevant coloured fret button on the guitar and pressing the strum bar, or by hitting the correct coloured note on the drums. For the singers out there, the game operates similarly to the Sing Star games, in that lyrics will appear for you, along with a note chart showing what pitch each word should be in, and you have to try and sing each section as well as possible. No matter what instrument you choose to use, you're scored based on how well you play and how many notes you hit. Should you play well and hit loads of notes in a row, you can build up a multiplier (up to 4x for most players, and 6x for the bassist) which can really ramp your score up. Of course, should you perform badly the crowd will start booing, and eventually you'll fail the song and be kicked off stage. Now the outline is done, let's get down to specifics. There are 2 things that can make or break a music game in my opinion, and they are the set list, and the gameplay mechanics. I'll deal with the set list first. Rock Band 2 comes with 84 songs packed onto the disc, all of which are master recordings. There is a great deal of variety in the songs, ranging from current stuff like Paramore, Foo Fighters, Avenged Sevenfold, Red Hot Chili Peppers and Tenacious D, to classic bands like Bon Jovi, Pearl Jam and Jethro Tull, to older classics like The Who, Elvis Costello, The Allman Brothers Band, and the Steve Miller Band. The genres covered mean that almost everyone who plays the game will find some songs they love. It's quite possibly the best and most well rounded collection of songs I've seen yet in a game of this type. Not only do you have the on disc songs however, but any song you've downloaded for the original Rock Band will work with Rock Band 2. Added to that, for a measly 400 MS points you can export all but 3 songs from your original Rock Band game into the sequel. These songs, as well as the downloaded tunes, will show up in the World Tour mode in mystery set lists and when you create your own set lists. Because of the forwards compatibility of the tunes, it means that anyone who has Rock Band 1 could easily load up the sequel and find way in excess of 150 songs available to play, with as many as 300 songs for those who religiously buy the downloadable song packs that are released every week. Now for the gameplay mechanics. Anyone who has played the original Rock Band will feel right at home here, as pretty much nothing has changed in this respect. Harmonix has definitely gone for a "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" approach here, and I feel the game benefits for it. There really wasn't any need to tinker with how the game actually played, as for me it was already the best of the music games out there. Instead, what they've done is spent time refining the game modes, and it's in this area that I feel Rock Band 2 has made the biggest leaps forward. The World Tour mode is now playable by a single person, or online with various friends, which is obviously a huge bonus for anyone who doesn't have 3 Rock Band loving mates living close by. The beauty of World Tour is that you're not stuck to a linear career any more. The main advantage of this is that in a linear career you may find you hit a certain level and can't get past a specific song. You're faced with either spending countless hours in the practise room trying to improve enough to beat the song, or restarting the career on an easier difficulty. With the World Tour mode, if you find yourself beaten by a song, you have 2 options. You can either play the song again at an easier difficulty, as you get to choose your level before you play each song (as opposed to setting a difficulty for the tour at the start), or you can simply go and play some other songs, going back to that one when you feel you've improved enough to beat it. It's a marked improvement over the linear career in my eyes. You also get the chance to hire staff during your tour of the globe, as well as new managers. Each manager has different advantages, such as opening up gigs earlier, letting you win more fans or money per performance and such like. My personal choice is to pick any manager that lets you win fans easier, as winning fans is part of the key to opening up new venues and gigs to play. Alongside the tour mode, you also have challenges for your band to play. These challenges range from ones for specific instruments to band related ones, and can have different themes to them (such as songs from a particular style of artist). Any downloaded songs you have will be incorporated into this mode, which is a nice way of extending the mode the more songs you buy. In a similar vein to the challenges, is the Battle of the Bands mode. The name is a bit of a misnomer really. You'd expect a battle of the bands mode to have your band pitting online against another in an event, and it's not strictly true here. In this Battle of the Bands, your band (or you) has to complete certain challenges and then your score is rated against everyone else in a leaderboard. Again, these challenges vary and could be anything from a bass guitar challenge (generally including the hardest bass guitar songs in the game), to whole band challenges, to challenges that have the "no-fail" option turned on and you have to get the longest note streak you can. Also

like the challenges, DLC songs are included in some sets here, meaning that some will be unavailable for you to play unless you're happy to go out and buy the song. Harmonix do rotate the challenges often though, with roughly 5-10 available at any one time, so if there's no challenges you fancy, check again in a few days to see what new ones have popped up. A new feature that I hinted at above is ideal when you get some inexperienced Rock Band players around – a "no fail" option. It can't be used in most of the game modes understandably, but if you and some friends fancy messing around in some quick play set lists without anyone worrying about failing a song, just turn the option on and play away. A simple option that definitely improves things for novice players who are worried they'd fail songs all the time. Also in there for novice players are the tutorials, as you'd expect. There is a new addition here though with a drum trainer. This attempts to improve drummers with three different sections – a Fill Trainer, a Beat Trainer, and a Freestyle mode. It's yet another nice addition that will no doubt be used by a great many people. It's a wonder actually that it took until the sequel to arrive, as it would certainly have helped me a lot when the original came out! With the modes, set list and other bits out of the way, we now come down to a question I'm sure several people have on their minds – which game is better; Rock Band 2 or Guitar Hero: World Tour? I spent about 3-4 hours playing Guitar Hero with a friend, and after finishing up an extensive session, I was left with an easy answer – Rock Band 2. There's no denying that Guitar Hero is a good game, but Rock Band 2 for me just "felt" better. It's not really a quantitative thing; it's really just a feeling I got when playing both games. Rock Band's note tracks just felt better. The World Tour mode just felt better, though the ability to play single song sets as opposed to multiple song sets all the time is a plus point for Rock Band. I'm sure there will be people out there who disagree with me, which is fine. What I will say though, is that if you're a fan of music games, if you've played any like any of the Guitar Hero or Rock Band games before and enjoyed them, then you need to get Rock Band 2. For my money it's the best music based game that's been released so far, and you owe it yourself to give it a try. Who knows, it could be the starting path on the road to rock stardom for you. Discuss this in our Forums