

Heros of All Shapes and Kinds: Guitar Hero Review

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With Red Octane's mega-popular franchise [Guitar Hero](#), rhythm games have finally exploded into the mainstream, and not just in the world of gaming, but popular culture too – with honorary mentions going to [South Park](#) for a whole episode, and [Ellen DeGeneres](#) rocking out live on her daytime show. *Guitar Hero* contests and regular party nights have become [commonplace](#) all over North America, not only in private homes, but in clubs, bars and schools. While the GH line is still going strong, its original creators – *Harmonix Studios* – were already [bought out by MTV](#), and together they came back with a vengeance with [Rock Band](#) – a lean mean band machine of double guitar, percussion and karaoke all-in-one. *Red Octane - Guitar Hero's* founder - was then forced to commission [Neversoft](#) to re-create GH III, the fourth edition of the franchise, completely from scratch, yet still very safely derivative of its predecessors. GH is a rhythm game played with a guitar-like controller to a soundtrack of some more and some less obscure rock 'anthems'. The mechanic is simple – match colour coded streaming notes by pressing up to five buttons on the neck of the guitar controller, while at the same time strumming in time with a plastic two-way clicker on the body of the guitar. The experience comes complete with a whammy bar for pitch-bending long notes; and tipping the guitar's neck in fits of rock-dom triggers 'star power' mode.

So what makes or breaks the Hero? Forget *Nintendo Wii's* claims to controller ingenuity. That mini plastic guitar is no doubt a huge part of the game's success. Has anyone heard of *Harmonix's* older rhythm game staples – *Frequency* and *Amplitude* for the PS2? Or *Guitaroo Man*? Right. It's only so much fun to mash three trigger buttons on a gamepad while imagining in your head that you are a DJ. *Guitar Hero* might have ended up in that category too, if it was made to be played with the standard gamepad. Music is a huge factor no doubt – endless synthetic rave is substituted by classic rock and roll in *Guitar Hero*, but guitars are the stars of this title, and they are no random choices either. GH I starts off with a classic *Gibson SG* look-alike, while the swankier PS3 version sports an all-black *Les Paul* wireless controller. The trend is clearly towards a more realistic, 'serious' look and abundant customization with a choice of wood veneers, stickers and various guitar body shapes. Still, *Rock Band* steals the show with the ultimate in electric guitar rock-dom: the *Fender Stratocaster*. This model conceals even more signs of plastic toy-ness with neutral colour buttons including a solo rock-out set at the base, a more realistically-sized body, and a silent 'clicker' strum, so your carpal tunnel power-shredding doesn't overshadow the actual music. Of course, to die-hard fans of the original GH controller, subtle sizing and touch-and-feel differences make this one a somewhat awkward fit.

Undoubtedly *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band* bring a different kind of full-bodied performativity to the otherwise pretend experience of being a guitar rock legend. Being a rockstar is something we mostly already know how to do. Rockstar-ism is encoded in a contemporary consumerist 'participatory' culture (Jenkins, 2006) and is performed and re-cited through imitative re-enactment (Jenson and de Castell, this issue) in *Guitar Hero*. Attesting to this is the title's continued success and flexibility for attracting new markets. [Activision](#) has sold some 14 million copies of the game, making more than a billion dollars to date. With *Red Octane's* newest title – *Guitar Hero: Aerosmith* – due to be released in

June of 2008, the trend is clear: both forgotten oldies and obscure indies can find a way to reach audiences through this new interactive music game format. New upscale guitar models would surely follow suit in mini-version controllers along with new game titles.

So can anyone be a ready-made guitar whiz right in the comfort of their own home? Make no mistake, you have to practice. A lot. Kinda like if you wanted to play a real instrument. (An argument whose fatal flaws are persuasively nailed in South Park's inimitable GQ episode.) Well, not as much for GH III, which, having to be redesigned from scratch, offers a new 'in' for Hero noobs, with easier scores overall and longer correct-hit timeframes. The original Guitar Hero's main (and maybe only!) drawback was, besides being really hard, its lack of practice modules. The only way to get 'good' at songs was to incessantly play them over and over again. In GH II this was corrected with a new Practice mode. Another valued addition was the Co-op mode, in recognition that *Guitar Hero* had instantly become a social group experience, not just a solitary game. Co-op allows for bass and lead guitar collaboration, in addition to friendly competition in Battle Mode. Enter *Rock Band*, which sweeps in to occupy those impatient friends who would otherwise be waiting in trepidation for their turn on the guitar, transforming home gaming into a pretend jam party. Just a quick word to Guitar Hero veterans – don't expect a big challenge in those guitar sections, all the mad stuff is saved up for the drummer parts.

Now there are those silent moments while a song is loading, when you look around and think, wow, don't we look a little silly with these plastic toys in our hands while the real guitars are collecting dust in the corner; mashing five brightly colored buttons in a bout of instant gratification, believing a little too much that "We Rock!" But hey, the crowd is cheering.

References:

Jenkins, H. et al. (2006) "Confronting the challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century." McAlister Foundation White Paper