

Rock Band

Making Millions Of New Drummers?

by Andy Ziker



One day my drum student Amanda walked into her lesson, sat down at the kit, and played a fast single-stroke roll—a skill she'd never demonstrated before. I asked Amanda if she'd practiced a lot in the past week. With a sheepish grin on her face, she admitted, "No, but I played Rock Band every day."

Now, I'm not one to play video games all day. In fact, I hadn't played one since Ms. Pac-Man was the hottest thing in the arcade. So at first I didn't quite get what my student was talking about. But after seeing what Rock Band had done to improve my student's technique, I *had* to check it out.

Getting Started

The first thing I did was buy an Xbox 360 gaming system and a copy of Rock Band, which comes with three controllers: a microphone, a guitar, and an electronic drumset consisting of a set of four drum pads and a bass drum pedal. The game allows up to four players to perform music by some of rock's biggest artists. (A second guitar controller has to be purchased in order to play both guitar and bass parts.) The game can also be played online, so you can play with other "rock stars" in the U.S. and Europe.

Assembling the drum-pad controller is a breeze, as easy-to-follow directions on your TV screen tell you what to do. It's as simple as finding your way around an ATM or cell phone.

To figure out how to "play" my new instrument/game, I needed some start-up tips. So I proceeded to the Tutorial mode. I

tried both the basic and intermediate tutorials. Kurt from Boston band The Konks led me through clearly presented lessons on the game's graphics, including the drum track (scrolling drum tabs), crowd and energy meters, scoring, big rock endings, fills, over-drive, and energy phrases. He also gave tips on technique such as how to hold the sticks, body positioning, and how to play the kick drum pedal.

Once I understood how the game works, I entered Quickplay mode. There I picked the song "Say It Ain't So" by Weezer and selected the medium level. (Players can pick between easy, medium, hard, and expert.) Because I've had years of traditional musical training that involves reading musical notation left to right, I had to recalibrate my brain as the "notes" came tumbling towards me in 3-D. Once I got used to this new way of "reading" music, I had loads of fun. The virtual crowd cheered and sang along to the song as I wailed away on the pads.

After playing through a couple of songs, I moved on to the Solo Tour mode. On the "Rocker Creator" page I gave myself a name (I decided on T-Bone) and chose a hometown, attitude (rock, punk, etc.), and body style (weight, height, face, skin color, etc.). From



there, I arrived at the Rock Shop and discovered that I could buy clothing and accessories such as glasses or earrings. I also could change my hairstyle, choose some tattoos, and add makeup and face paint. (You pay for these extras by earning money at "gigs.") I also decided to alter the color/finish of my virtual Ludwig drumset. This entire process was so entertaining that I literally laughed out loud. Even for someone with little video game experience, it didn't take long for me to be up to speed on the world of imaginary rock 'n' roll.

More Ways To Rock

Besides the play modes previously discussed, Rock Band includes two others. In Practice mode, you can focus on a difficult section of a song or slow down a song's tempo up to 50%.

In Band World Tour mode, players devise their own characters and create a band logo. You begin with gigs in small venues until successful performances unlock vans, tour buses, and private jets to take you to additional cities around the world. Success also earns the band more fans and increased amounts of cash (to be spent in the Rock Shop).

What's The Use?



Several drum industry manufacturers have partnered with the makers of Rock Band. Ludwig and Zildjian are the exclusive instrument brands in the game, Vic Firth provides the drumsticks, and Vater gives successful players make-believe endorsements. Vic Firth and Vater also sell merchandise in the virtual store.

It's not surprising that these companies have teamed up with the makers of Rock Band. This game is likely to have a similar effect on drummers that CDs/DVDs, drum machines, electronic drums, Pro Tools, iPods, and the Internet have had in the past.

But how could a video game have such an impact? Here are some ways it's influencing potential musicians:

1) Increases the pool of young drummers. Most young people (as well as many adults) love video games, and Rock Band is one of the most popular. Rock Band drumkits are currently sitting next to the TV in millions of homes in the U.S. and Europe. Even non-musicians are working on their drumming skills in order to advance through the levels of the game. At the expert level, these players are essentially playing the original drum parts note for note. So it wouldn't be a leap of logic to think that many of these video gamers might eventually seek out a drum instructor, buy some drums, and start a real band.

2) Promotes live music. As gamers become obsessed with the amazing virtual experience that Rock Band provides, there's a good

Soundtrack And Downloadable Songs

The fifty-eight play-along tracks in Rock Band include hit

songs from many popular bands. Here's a partial list: The Rolling Stones "Gimme Shelter," The Who "Won't Get Fooled Again," The Police "Next to You," David Bowie "Suffragette City," Black Sabbath "Paranoid," Blue Oyster Cult "Don't Fear The Reaper," The Ramones "Blitzkrieg Bop," KISS "Detroit Rock City," Rush "Tom Sawyer," Bon Jovi "Wanted Dead Or Alive," The Clash "Should I Stay Or Should I Go," R.E.M. "Orange Crush," Iron Maiden "Run To The Hills," Foo Fighters "Learn To Fly," Metallica "Enter Sandman," Nirvana "In Bloom," Stone Temple Pilots "Vasoline," Weezer "Say It Ain't So," Smashing Pumpkins "Cherub Rock," Radiohead "Creep," Soundgarden "Black Hole Sun," Nine Inch Nails "The Hand That Feeds," and Red Hot Chili Peppers "Dani California."

Players can go to the Rock Band Music Store to choose from hundreds of other songs available for download through XBOX Live and the Playstation Network Store. Each additional track costs \$1.99.

chance that they'll begin to go to more shows and concerts.

3) New platform for recorded music. New music is being made available for Rock Band all the time, including full albums like Judas Priest's classic *Screaming For Vengeance*. Motley Crue even released their new single, "Saints Of Los Angeles," as a downloadable track for Rock Band.

4) Education. Drum instructors now have access to an amazing teaching tool, and drum students have an incredibly fun way to begin making music.

An Experiment

After witnessing the quick effects of Rock Band on my student Amanda's basic technique, I decided to do a little experiment. Amanda was already playing "Say It Ain't So" by Weezer at an expert level, so I used her next two lessons to see how well this knowledge transferred to real drumming.

I began by having her try to play along with the Weezer track. As soon as she put on the headphones, she played the song as if it was familiar to her. Next, I put a transcription of the tune in front of her to see if the scrolling note-charts in Rock Band translated over to reading drumset notation. She had difficulty with this at first. But then she asked, "Would you mind if I added color to the noteheads? That way, reading the drum score would be more like Rock Band."

At her next lesson, Amanda showed me how she used different colored pens to highlight the noteheads in the chart (red for the snare, orange for the bass drum, etc.). Then she played through the first part of "Say It Ain't So" by herself flawlessly (while reading the drum chart). After that, we played the entire tune together. "Coloring the notes makes them easier to read," Amanda proclaimed. "You're not just looking at a black and white sheet of music."

Over the course of just one week, Rock Band helped Amanda improve her drumset and reading skills, and she gained confidence in her ability to play "real" drums. So even though it's designed for home entertainment purposes, Rock Band could end up inspiring a whole new generation of wannabe rockers to put down their controllers and head out to the garage for a jam session. And for an aspiring drum teacher, you can't buy that kind of cross promotion.



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