

Harmonix's Fuser wants to make you a DJ... but only up to a point

Enlarge / You can't have Coachella this summer, but you can fake like a Coachella main-stage DJ "this fall" with Harmonix's *Fuser*.

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Late last decade, plastic guitars and motion sensors vanished from the console gaming landscape—and, coincidentally, the same goes for Harmonix. For years, the pioneering music-gaming developer has struggled to break out with a mainstream hit anywhere near the scale of *Guitar Hero*, *Rock Band*, or *Dance Central*.

The company's last new-series stab, 2018's *DropMix*, was a complicated gamble, as it required players to buy a bulky peripheral and a series of physical playing cards. *DropMix* had its aficionados, but for whatever reason—a smartphone requirement, or a "buy more cards to get more songs" gimmick—the collaboration with toymaker Hasbro didn't pan out.

Harmonix is clearly still bullish on *DropMix*'s music-engineering trickery, which revolves around letting players splice and combine existing songs' separate elements (vocals, guitars, drums) and become "mash-up" DJs. This year, the developer is trying again with *Fuser*, a version made specifically for consoles and PC. Thanks to Harmonix, we were

able to go hands-on with the game's latest preview build ahead of its launch "this fall," and our existing controllers sufficed—no additional hardware or cards are required. That's good news, but does that mean *Fuser* is poised to succeed where *DropMix* failed?

The Carly Rae Pitbull creation of your... dreams?

- The *Fuser* interface includes four "turntables" on which you'll drop elements taken from songs in your crate (seen in the top-most wrap of album covers). This screen shows what happens when you drop a new melody element (typically green) onto your mix.
- Unlike *DropMix*, which struggled to gamify this mechanic, *Fuser* throws requests at players. Some appear as shouts from fans. Others appear as sidebar requests.
- Campaign missions have some songs as "requirements" (noted with check marks). You'll get additional slots to add personal favorites.
- Three turntables explode simultaneously because they've had a "riser" triggered. This lets you swap the entire soundscape for a new one as you see fit, which is a nice tweak that *DropMix* couldn't support.
- Call Carly's song sample, maybe.

As a base experience, *Fuser* works similarly to *DropMix*. Players manage a DJ platform and juggle a "crate" full of songs, each split into four elements (drums, lead melody, bass, vocals). As you splice and mix each element, you can create a variety of pop-music monstrosities. Make DMX rap over a Lady Gaga melody, then nudge a Fatboy Slim drumbeat into the mix. You have control of four sonic elements at a time this time, cut down from *DropMix*'s quintet of simultaneous sounds, but you're also freed to use any sound types on any "turntable." Want to drill a moment down with two drum beats

and two bass lines? How about four vocal tracks competing with each other? Go ahead.

Fuser adds one useful trick you might expect from a digital DJ platform: a “cue” system. Use this to assemble a quartet of musical elements “on deck,” then tap a button to transition the current mix into the new one. You can either have them all switch over instantly, or you can ask *Fuser* to turn on a “smart riser,” which switches the key and tempo to emphasize an element in the new mix. (You can also manually fudge with the key and tempo at any time.)

Should you seek more than a mash-up sound toy, *Fuser* has your back in the form of a campaign mode. On paper, this sounds like a no-brainer way to add challenge to the formula. Various “requests” will pop up during the span of your stage performance, with demands like “play a country drum beat” or “play only vocals and drums” for a certain number of measures. In the course of fulfilling these requests, you’ll also be expected to remove and add sonic elements according to a “downbeat” meter, which ticks along like a metronome.

A “crowd” meter changes how many points you score for either fulfilling requests or freestyling, and that crowd meter will grow so long as you maintain a steady level of sonic variety. Swap records too quickly or madly, and the crowd meter will shrink (which Harmonix says it’s doing to stop players from madly swapping records to the beat, which would arguably get a real-life DJ booed off the stage).

Chained to the master loop timeline

At first blush, all of this works well enough, mostly because each sampled chunk is time- and pitch-shifted to fit with the others. You can’t manually turn an individual element into a screeching mismatch with the others.

The thing is, my hands-on time with the pre-release game went

beyond the usual 20-minute E3-styled demo thanks to an unlimited timer. And that left me pretty quickly grasping for creative straws.

Enlarge / The kind of song and genre variety you can expect from *Fuser*. Is that enough for you? Will roughly 70 more songs make up for anything missing here? That remains to be seen. One glaring example comes from a new “make-your-own-element” panel, which lets you tap on a 16-button panel to create a new, synthesized element for your mix, like keyboards, saxophone, or drums. The trouble is, *Fuser* only includes pre-made loops in this section, which you can *slightly* tweak in terms of tone and texture with that 16-button panel. When I saw the panel, I thought I was getting something like a pure sample trigger, the kind that established DJs use to make their own on-the-fly beats. *Fuser* taps those creative brakes.

Worse, the popular songs in this game are, for the most part, firmly constructed as 128-beat loops. The campaign's focus is on adding or removing sonic elements with button-tapping precision for high scores, so it expects you to swap tunes on a regular basis and enjoy the surprises that come from mixing and matching these fixed loops. But you can't guarantee in a given moment that you're inserting, say, the catchy "Hair down, check my nails" vocal line from Lizzo's "Feelin' Good" or the snare-tapping, build-up moment from Macklemore and Ryan Lewis' "Thrift Shop." You're chained to the master-loop timeline.

And then there's the song selection, whose 34-song demo selection doesn't appear to benefit from the tighter genre focus we got from *Rock Band* or *Dance Central*. If the soundtrack revolved entirely around one musical archetype, we might have gotten a more interesting mix variety to work with—like a deeper breakbeat crate, full of classic jazz and funk samples, or a wider, zanier variety of rock subgenres (grunge, new wave, metal). The dissonance of attaching Nelly's voice to a Billie Eilish melody runs out of steam a little faster.

A DJ's unique creative process

[embedded content]

Fuser trailer, June 2020 edition.

The rub, of course, is that Harmonix is trying to make a game where you feel like a DJ superstar without requiring real-world DJ abilities, much like *Guitar Hero* let people fake like a rock star with only a few buttons. Slapping an entire "make-your-own-music" system around *Fuser* might defeat that purpose, right?

But unlike other classic Harmonix games, which ask you to pantomime your favorite bands, *Fuser* opens players up to a DJ's unique creation process. The game's latest pre-release

demo, made available exclusively to press, fakes that sensation up to a point; when you follow the campaign's opening instructions, the resulting songs are catchy and full of compatible elements, and this is aided by the game's sneaky, automatic tweaks to tempo and key when new elements land in the mix. From a "baby's first DJ" gameplay perspective, this beats the pants off of the tap-to-the-beat weirdness of 2009's *DJ Hero*.

But even when playing *Fuser*'s campaign, as opposed to the "freestyle" creative mode, the game constantly reminds you that variety matters, as opposed to blindly following a pattern of notes (these reminders come in the form of the aforementioned "crowd meter"). And in its current implementation, *Fuser* already needs more variety once the first-blush bluster wears off. Players can't trigger customized samples. They can't experiment with unusual time signatures. And they can't access elements from included songs outside the 128-beat meter.

Harmonix tells Ars Technica it won't add music-creation tools for users unless they ask for it: "If the cry from the community is to get tools for bands and DJs to put their stuff in, then, you know, I'd be thrilled," one of the game's developers tells Ars. (When I suggest that *Beat Saber* is beloved in part because of its built-in custom-music options, the *Fuser* team replies bluntly: "We are advocates of licensing music at Harmonix.") The devs also aren't ready to confirm plans for future paid DLC, beyond saying the game is "architected" to support add-ons but that its "100-plus" song package is meant to offer "value out of the box."

We'll keep an eye on *Fuser* to see how it evolves before launching on Xbox One, PlayStation 4, Nintendo Switch, and Windows PCs "this fall."

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