Review: 'Rocksmith' rocks out with real guitars

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This video game image courtesy of Ubisoft Entertainment shows the video game "Rocksmith." (AP Photo/Ubisoft Entertainment)

If "Guitar Hero" was the spunky teenager who made music gaming fun, "Rocksmith" is his older, cooler brother in a distressed leather jacket.

"Rocksmith" ([Ubisoft](), for [Xbox 360](), [PlayStation 3](), PC, $79.99) trades in the now familiar plastic [guitar]() with buttons for the real, six-stringed deal. You simply plug your [electric guitar]() - or an acoustic guitar with a pickup - into your console or computer. For $199, you can get the software bundled with an entry-level Epiphone Les Paul Jr. guitar.

Generation after generation of would-be Eric Claptons have tried learning the guitar with instructors, books, DVDs and other teaching tools. Most of us get stuck at the intro to "Stairway to Heaven." With some minor guitar experience under my belt, I dared "Rocksmith" to

teach me, entertain me and keep me engaged. It succeeded on all fronts.

Guitar lessons turn into a game: Keep in step with the colored, glowing and spinning rectangles that fall down the screen and land on a numbered fret. The more notes you get correct, the better your score.

It takes some getting used to. The descending rectangles are colored with a different hue for each of the six guitar strings. But most guitar strings aren't colored, so you have to mentally keep track of those color-and-string pairs - which change quickly during the action.

I was able to learn the melody to The Rolling Stones' "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction" within minutes, but the techniques get more complicated. For example, the double-stops technique requires covering two strings at the same time while muting the adjacent strings. It's easy when you're looking down and staring at your fingers with all the time in the world. It's a lot harder when you have to look at the screen, remember where the correct frets are by muscle memory and strike them fast enough to get ready for the next set of notes.

The teaching aspect of "Rocksmith" hinges on the very nature of playing a video game. You have to watch the screen. You don't have a lot of time to look at your hands. So you are forced to get better at knowing where the frets are by feel, as well as how to pluck, say, the fourth string instead of the fifth without looking.

The "Rocksmith" playlist runs from classic rockers like The Animals and Cream to up-and-comers like Titus Andronicus and the Black Keys. There's also an "amp" mode in which you can play whatever you like, and you can download filters that add fuzz, feedback, distortion or other effects to the sound mix.

Once you've mastered a few techniques and chords, you might want to

power off the game and see where the instrument will take you all on its own. The ultimate challenge presented by "Rocksmith" is to get good enough that you won't play it all. You'll just play the guitar. Four out of four stars.

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