KARINA MORITZEN

Opening Up Virtual Mosh Pits

Music Scenes and In-Game Concerts in Fortnite *and* Minecraft

ABSTRACT This article investigates the sociabilities that surround in-game concerts and music scenes in the massively multiplayer online games *Fortnite* and *Minecraft*. Drawing on ludomusicology and cultural studies, it will rethink the virtual music scene concept to better incorporate the technical, economical, aesthetic, and social aspects that affect how relationships are developed inside MMOs among members for whom music and games play a primordial role in their personal life-worlds. Focusing on Travis Scott's *Astronomical* performance in *Fortnite* sponsored by the video game and music industries, as well as the independent music festivals in *Minecraft* organized by volunteer-run virtual events producer Open Pit, allows for comparisons that are valuable in highlighting the characteristics that define a virtual music scene and differentiate it from an in-game concert. In order to conduct such a task, this essay will analyze Scott's *Astronomical* performance currently hosted on YouTube while also considering statements made by the rapper in his 2019 Netflix documentary *Travis Scott: Look Mom, I Can Fly* and magazine interviews with the rapper and the team responsible for this event. In order to understand Open Pit's festivals, several interviews with its members available online, as well as excursions undertaken by journalists to these events, will be investigated, providing an immersive account of what attending an Open Pit music festival can feel like from their perspectives. In the end, the article argues that as much as Scott's performance changed what can be expected of in-game concerts by joining game and music aesthetics, Open Pit's periodic events and their connection to the hyperpop music genre are a better representation of the virtual music scene concept developed in this article.   KEYWORDS Music scene, hyperpop, Travis Scott, Open Pit, Minecraft, Fortnite

INTRODUCTION

Online games, beyond their initial recreational function, are also places of social interaction, performance, and audience.[1] The potential of video games to function as media has even led to claims that they could be "the new MTV," where the most current musical trends would be created.[2] This article intends to investigate the sociabilities that spawn around music performances inside the massively multiplayer online games (MMOs) *Fortnite* and *Minecraft* by analyzing several journalistic accounts of such events published on online media.

1. Karen Collins, *Playing with Sound: A Theory of Interacting with Sound and Music in Video Games* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 1.
2. Holly Tessler, "The New MTV? Electronic Arts and 'Playing' Music," in *From Pac-Man to Pop Music: Interactive Audio in Games and New Media*, ed. Karen Collins (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2008), 13.

This article recognizes—although it doesn't explore in depth—the ambiguous definition of liveness in a virtual environment. For the present proposal, live musical performances take place when gamers gather simultaneously around an exhibition staged inside the game mechanics. On this topic, Angela Cresswell-Jones and Rebecca Bennett affirm that "thanks to digital technologies, the definition of 'live music' has also expanded to include a number of forms that do not require the artist and audience to share the same space or even the same time."[3]

Based on this gathering of spectators around musical performances in-game, this article explores the possibility of virtual music scenes in these spaces. In order to discuss music scenes, I will draw on the concept coined by Will Straw, and developed further by Brazilian researchers such as Simone Pereira de Sá and Jeder Janotti Jr., Thiago Soares, Luciana Xavier de Oliveira, Tobias Queiroz, and myself, regarding the groupings around music in mostly cosmopolitan cities—with the notable exception of Queiroz's work, which focuses on music scenes happening around bars in the countryside of Brazil's northeast region.[4]

Virtual music scenes were conceptualized by Andy Bennett and Richard A. Peterson and later questioned for not delving deeply enough into the specificities that socio-technical networks imply on these phenomena, as pointed out by Pereira de Sá.[5] It is therefore a fruitful exercise to rethink the concept of a virtual music scene to embrace in a thorough way the characteristic social processes present in games, as the interactivity made possible by the media aspect of video games present new avenues for communication.[6]

The objects of this exploration are live music concerts in *Fortnite* and *Minecraft*. Virtual concerts in both games made headlines in specialized online magazines around the same time in 2020, when this exploration started. In *Fortnite*, big names in the music industry like the rapper Travis Scott and DJ Marshmallo performed for gamers who lowered their weapons to focus on the events.[7] Scott's concert on April 23, 2020,

3. Angela Cresswell-Jones and Rebecca Bennett, introduction to *The Digital Evolution of Live Music*, ed. Angela Cresswell-Jones and Rebecca Bennett (Amsterdam: Chandos, 2015), xiii.

4. Will Straw, "Systems of Articulation, Logics of Change: Communities and Scenes in Popular Music," *Cultural Studies* 5, no. 3 (1991): 368–88, https://doi.org/10.1080/09502389100490311 (accessed April 10, 2022); Simone Pereira de Sá and Jeder Janotti Jr., *Cenas Musicais* (São Paulo: Andarco, 2013); Thiago Soares, *"Ninguém É Perfeito e a Vida é Assim": a Música Brega Em Pernambuco* (Recife, Brazil: Outros Críticos, 2017); Luciana Xavier de Oliveira, *A Cena Musical Da Black Rio: Estilo e mediações Nos Bailes Soul Dos Anos 1970* (Salvador, Brazil: EDUFBA, 2018); Tobias Queiroz, *Pandêmônios e Notívagos: Decolonizando a Cena do Rock no Nordeste* (Belo Horizonte, Brazil: Selo PPGCOM/UFMG, 2021); Karina Moritzen, "Entre Gatas, Demônias, Flores e Darma: Atravessamentos de Gênero em Cenas Musicais Natalenses de Rock" (master's diss., UFRN, 2020).

5. Andy Bennett and Richard A. Peterson, *Music Scenes: Local, Translocal & Virtual* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004); Simone Pereira de Sá, "As Cenas, as Redes e o Ciberespaço: Sobre a (in)Validade Da Utilização Da Noção De Cena Musical Virtual," in *Cenas Musicais* (São Paulo: Andarco, 2013), 29-40.

6. Emmanoel Ferreira, "Games, imersão e interatividade: novos paradigmas para uma comunicação lúdica" (master's diss., UFRJ, 2007), https://bit.ly/3pYQ5we (accessed January 10, 2021).

7. Marc Hogan, "Where Can Virtual Concerts Go after Travis Scott's Fortnite Extravaganza?," Pitchfork, May 5, 2020, https://pitchfork.com/thepitch/virtual-concerts-travis-scotts-fortnite-100-gecs-minecraft/. (accessed April 7, 2022); Tom Gerken, "Fortnite: 'Millions Attend' Virtual Marshmello Concert," BBC News, February 4, 2019, https://bbc.in/3fEPOvg (accessed April 7, 2022).

gathered more than 12 million simultaneous spectators in just its first exhibition. In total, 27 million players watched the concert 45.8 million times in four opportunities spread across three days. This event is mentioned in *The Cambridge Companion to Video Game Music* as part of the section "A Landmark Timeline of Video Game Music," being portrayed as a virtual concert that "brought new attention to the format."[8]

In contrast, independent event organizer Open Pit has, since 2018, produced music festivals in *Minecraft* that attract a smaller number of gamers who form a consistent, returning audience. The event lineups frequently feature artists associated with hyperpop, including, among others, 100 gecs, Charli XCX, and Umru. Eli Enis of *Vice* magazine describes hyperpop as follows:

> The PC Music sound is an undeniable influence on hyperpop, but the style also pulls heavily from rap of the cloud, emo and lo-fi trap variety, as well as flamboyant electronic genres like trance, dubstep and chiptune. Sonic fusionists like 100 gecs, glitchy rappers like David Shawty, and animated electronic producers like Gupi have all been described as hyperpop. Each of those artists are already making unclassifiable combinations of genres, so outside of a collective allegiance to gaudy auto-tune, hyperpop's identity is less rooted in musical genetics than it is a shared ethos of transcending genre altogether, while still operating within the context of pop.[9]

The Open Pit *Minecraft* events attract people to virtual concerts that are not fixed to a specific geographical territory—like a town or a neighborhood—although they provide connections between musical practices, the development of a new music genre, sociability, and a sense of belonging that, when put together, indicate the existence of a virtual music scene. These events have exposed hyperpop to a larger audience and played a pivotal role in the popularization of the emerging music genre.

This article intends to navigate virtual concerts and the current definition of virtual music scenes, exploring how they develop in and around games and gaming culture. It will also argue that sociability is a necessary component of a music scene, and therefore not every virtual concert will be able to provide enough space for a scene to flourish. It is in this sense that the opposition between *Fortnite* and *Minecraft* concerts takes place. While a *Fortnite* event is the result of expensive efforts by the video game and music industries combined, expanding the limits of what the virtual concert experience can offer, it is also an experience that leaves little space for interaction among gamers during the concert inside the game, as well as little opportunity for input from the gamers into the concert. On the other hand, the *Minecraft* example is more representative of a participatory culture in which the gamers themselves organize the concerts, perform as artists, and interact with each other through chats inside the *Minecraft* or Discord servers assigned to the events, as well as through the clashing avatars that gather around the performers.

8. Melanie Fritsch and Tim Summers, *The Cambridge Companion to Video Game Music* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2021), xxxi.

9. Eli Enis, "This Is Hyperpop: A Genre Tag for Genre-Less Music," *Vice*, October 27, 2020, https://www.vice.com/en/article/bvx85v/this-is-hyperpop-a-genre-tag-for-genre-less-music (accessed April 8, 2022).

This article will raise the following questions: Is it possible to identify virtual music scenes around in-game concerts online? What are the main similarities and differences between big-budget events like the ones in *Fortnite* and the independent ones produced in *Minecraft*? In order to answer these questions, this article will review online magazine articles containing several journalists' accounts of such events and connect them to the academic discourse on virtual music scenes.

DISCOURSE ON MUSIC SCENES IN GAME MUSIC STUDIES

The study of music in games, or ludomusicology, is a constantly growing field. Because online games today represent not only one of the largest and most lucrative entertainment industries but also an ever more popular media through which communicational processes take place, identifying the ways sociabilities around music occur in these environments is of interest to the areas of communication, musicology, and cultural and game studies.[10] The making of concerts creates new social relations inside and around these games. The contrast between the two research objects chosen—the concerts in *Fortnite* produced by the music and video game industries and in *Minecraft* by volunteers—provides insights that allow a speculative idea of the interactions between gamers in these events.

One of the first efforts directed toward the study of music in games is *Game Sound* by Karen Collins, professor at the University of Waterloo in Canada. According to Collins:

> This element of interactivity distinguishes games from many other forms of media, in which the physical body is "transcended" in order to be immersed in the narrative space (of the television/film screen, and so on). Although the goal of many game developers is to create an immersive experience, the body cannot be removed from the experience of video game play, which has interesting implications for sound.[11]

The fact that the body cannot be removed from the experience of attending virtual concerts inside games raises further questions. It is this interactivity that transforms digital social relations inside music events on their platforms, creating a sort of corporeality through the avatars, which influences the kinds of sociability that can be found inside these spaces. The feeling of proximity between members of the audience transforms an experience that may at first seem lonely into a space of new opportunities for exercising social skills that transcend spatial limitations.

There are previous connections between scenes and the studies of video game music. In 2008, Collins also organized the collection of essays *From Pac-Man to Pop Music*, in which various authors dissect particular aspects of game music.[12] It is in this

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10. During lockdown occasioned by the Covid-19 pandemic, the UK games industry reached a record of £7 billion in sales, a £1.6 billion increase from 2019. Mark Sweney, "Lockdown Boredom Drives UK Video Games Market to £7bn Record High," *Guardian*, March 19, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/games/2021/mar/19/lockdown-boredom-drives-uk-video-games-market-to-7bn-record-high (accessed April 8, 2022).

11. Collins, *Game Sound*, 3.

12. Karen Collins, ed., *From Pac-Man to Pop Music: Interactive Audio in Games and New Media* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2008).

book that Anders Carlsson describes the demoscene and chiptune music as a digital subculture centered around hackers who cracked software for fun and as a political statement, hoping to make them available for free on the internet.[13] Popular in Europe, this "cracking scene" emerged with the debut of the Apple Computer II and the Atari 800 in 1979. Among the software cracked by these hackers were also many games.

Carlsson writes that the demoscene was compared to the graffiti scene in that it used a subversion of the rules in search of fame and the construction of identity. The example described by Carlsson calls attention to the existence of prior virtual music scenes that date back to the end of the 1970s and were present during the 1980s. Another interesting point is the emergence of the musical genre chiptune music, produced with computers around this scene. Even using the term "music scene," Cardoso Filho and Ferreira explore how technology was used in ways that deviated from their intended purpose in order to create music as in the case of chiptune.[14] On March 20, 2021, by UNESCO's suggestion, the Standing Conference of Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs recognized demoscene as German intangible cultural heritage.[15]

As examples of musical performances inside games and virtual worlds, Collins highlights the concerts in *Second Life* and *Lord of the Rings Online* (*LotRO*);[16] Kent and Ellis approach the virtual nightclub Wheelies, directed toward people with disabilities in *Second Life*, as an example of the inclusion that virtual platforms may represent;[17] Harvey, Gagen and Cook, and Chávez-Aguayo explore several aspects of *Second Life* live performances;[18] and Cheng presents a virtual ethnography of *LotRO* in which he attends musical performances and interviews gamers to construct a tridimensional overview of the sociability processes developed around them.[19]

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13. Anders Carlsson, "Chip Music: Low Tech Data Music Sharing," in *From Pac-Man to Pop Music: Interactive Audio in Games and New Media*, ed. Karen Collins (Abingdon, England: Routledge, 2016), 154.

14. Jorge Cardoso Filho and Emmanoel Ferreira, "Playing (with) the Music: Jogo e Apropriação Na Cena Musical Chiptune," *Journal of Digital Media and Interaction* 2, no. 4 (December 29, 2019): 42–57, https://doi.org/10.34624/jdmi.v2i4.8037 (accessed April 11, 2022).

15. Art of Coding Team, "Demoscene Accepted as UNESCO Cultural Heritage in Germany" Demoscene—The Art of Coding, March 22, 2021, http://demoscene-the-art-of-coding.net/2021/03/20/demoscene-accepted-as-unesco-cultural-heritage-in-germany/ (accessed April 11, 2022).

16. Collins, *Playing with Sound*, 92–96.

17. Mike Kent and Kathleen Ellis, "Live Music in a Virtual World: Exuberant Flourishing and Disability at Wheelies Nightclub in Second Life," in *The Digital Evolution of Live Music*, ed. Angela Cresswell-Jones and Rebecca Jane Bennett (Amsterdam: Chandos, 2015), 85–98.

18. Trevor S. Harvey, "Constructing Musical Personae in Virtual Worlds" in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Virtuality*, ed. Sheila Whiteley and Shara Rambarran (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 171–90; Justin Gagen and Nicholas Cook, "Performing Live in Second Life," in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Virtuality*, ed. Sheila Whiteley and Shara Rambarran (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 191–209; Marco Antonio Chávez-Aguayo, "Live Opera Performance in Second Life: Challenging Producers, Performers and the Audience," in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Virtuality*, ed. Sheila Whiteley and Shara Rambarran (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 210–25.

19. William Cheng, *Sound Play: Video Games and the Musical Imagination* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2014), 120.

This literature uses the terms *online communities*, *subcultures*, and *scenes* to refer to groupings around video game music often in an interchangeable way. As there was a similar discussion in cultural studies years ago as to the more fitting nomenclature to apply to these phenomena,[20] the re-emergence of the virtual concert presents a good opportunity to revisit the virtual music scene concept. Thus, it should be apparent that video game music studies alongside the more general study of music scenes will serve as an appropriate theoretical framework within which to analyze the selected subjects.

VIRTUAL MUSIC SCENES

Will Straw, professor at McGill University and a researcher on the now extinct project The Culture of Cities, became a pioneer in the academic study of music scenes and their relation to the urban environments in which they are located. Straw began his discussion of the subject in a conference titled The Music Industry in a Changing World, which would be published in 1991 in the journal *Cultural Studies* as the seminal article "Systems of Articulation, Logics of Change: Communities and Scenes in Popular Music." It is in this article that he coined a concept that would shift from the then current definitions of *musical community* and *subculture*. Following the ideas of Miège, Bourdieu, and de Certeau, Straw's definition claims that "a musical scene, in contrast, is that cultural space in which a range of musical practices coexist, interacting with each other within a variety of processes of differentiation, and according to widely varying trajectories of change and cross-fertilization."[21]

Before Straw, this term had been used in cultural journalism. Barry Shank's study of the rock music scene of Austin, Texas, is also credited as a landmark for applying the term in academia. By describing a scene that no longer existed in his current time, reconstructing it through media and photographic records, his own memory, and those of his interviewees, Shank uses the notion of a scene and describes it as "a signifying community, marked off from the surrounding world, to which one, in some sense, already belongs—where the musicalized expression of semiotic disruption has immediate meaning."[22]

Music scenes became a field of interest in Brazil and various theses were published on it, as can be shown by the work of researchers from around the country. The collection of essays *Cenas Musicais*, released in 2013 and organized by Simone Pereira de Sá and Jeder Janotti Jr., is an example of how "music scene" can be useful for analyzing distinct musical phenomena.[23] Luciana Xavier de Oliveira is also anchored in the music scene concept when she guides a rich reconstruction of the Black Rio balls scene in the 1970s;[24] Thiago Soares applies the concept to the *brega* music genre in Pernambuco;[25] and Tobias

20. David Hesmondhalgh, "Subcultures, Scenes or Tribes? None of the Above," *Journal of Youth Studies* 8, no. 1 (2005): 21–40, https://doi.org/10.1080/13676260500063652 (accessed May 4, 2022).

21. Straw, *Systems of Articulation*, 373.

22. Barry Shank, *Dissonant Identities: The Rock 'n' Roll Scene in Austin, Texas* (Hanover, MD: University Press of New England, 1994), 122.

23. Pereira de Sá and Janotti Jr., *Cenas Musicais*.

24. Oliveira, *A Cena Musical da Black Rio*.

25. Soares, *Ninguém É Perfeito e a Vida É Assim*.

Queiroz uses it to analyze the implications of heavy metal scenes hosted in bars located in three cities in the countryside of the northeast region, then coining the term "decolonial music scene."[26]

However, the particularities of a scene are not only defined by the physical and geographical space that it occupies. At present time, the work of Andy Bennett and Richard A. Peterson is essential when it comes to the developing of the concepts of local, translocal, and virtual music scenes. Translocal music scenes, according to Bennett and Peterson, are local music scenes that keep in touch with each other, displaying similarities despite geographical distance. The authors continue:

> Whereas a conventional local scene is kept in motion by a series of gigs, club nights, fairs, and similar events where fans converge, communicate, and reinforce their sense of belonging to a particular scene, the virtual scene involves direct Net-mediated person-to-person communication between fans, and the scene is therefore much more nearly in the control of fans. This may involve, for example, the creation of chat rooms or listservs dedicated to the scene and the trading of music and images online.[27]

Bennett and Peterson are mainly considering chat rooms and listservs as places of interaction in virtual scenes anchored on the internet. When the virtual concerts in games become relevant to virtual music scenes, communication also happens through avatars that bring along a sense of embodiment. This factor raises new aspects that inspire further consideration.

Pereira de Sá questions the use of virtual music scenes as proposed by Bennett and Peterson, stating that "by transposing to the digital environment, any scene will be called to consider the specificities—aesthetic, technical, economical—of this new environment," to the point that Bennett and Peterson's postulations would not focus in depth on the mediations imposed by digital culture.[28] This is the reason why the virtual music scenes discussed in this article—those that develop inside the environment of games—will be reconceptualized to include the sociabilities found inside *Minecraft* and *Fortnite*. Pereira de Sá describes a music scene as:

> a) An environment local or global; b) Marked by the sharing of aesthetic-behavioral references; c) That supposes the processing of references from one or more music genres, originating or not a new genre; d) Pointing to the mobile, fluid and metamorphic frontiers of youth groupings; e) Which supposes a territorial demarcation from urban circles that leave concrete traces in the life of the city and of immaterial circuits of cyberculture, that also leave traces and produce sociability effects; f) Marked strongly by the mediatic dimension.[29]

26. Queiroz, "Pandemônios e Notívagos"; Tobias Queiroz, "Cena Musical Decolonial: Uma Proposição," *Mediação* 22, no. 29 (December 12, 2019): 173–200, http://revista.fumec.br/index.php/mediacao/issue/view/388 (accessed May 4, 2022).

27. Bennett and Peterson, *Music Scenes*, 11.

28. Pereira de Sá, "As Cenas, As Redes e o Ciberespaço," 32. Translation by the author.

29. Simone Pereira de Sá, "Will Straw: Cenas Musicais, Sensibilidades, Afetos e a Cidade," in *Comunicação e Estudos Culturais*, ed. Itania Maria Mota Gomes (Salvador, Brazil: EDUFBA, 2011), 157. Translation by the author.

Following on Pereira de Sá's understanding, the virtual music scenes built inside games can be thought of as a place of exchange and communicative interaction between individuals who share similar sonic, sensorial, and affective experiences, finding inside the game a comfortable and—most of the time—safe space to practice their involvement with music. It is possible to affirm, therefore, that virtual music scenes inside games are social constructs populated by people to whom music and games play a primary role in their particular life-worlds, influenced by online interactions.

Straw himself in the article "Some Things a Scene Might Be"—a part of the "Scene Thinking" issue in the *Cultural Studies* journal—recognizes the possibilities of applying the concept of scenes in the sphere of video games, while referring to Sara Grimes's article on *LittleBigPlanet* (emphasis added):

> It pushes the notion of scene as collective unity in productive new directions and in doing so holds out **the promise that game studies may be one of the fields in which the theorization of scene is renewed most vigorously**. Video games, Grimes shows here, not only link together spatially dispersed gestures of affinity (like the simultaneous playing of a game) but also serve as the ground for other, more complex sorts of collective behaviour. Games allow for collectivities of people distributed in space to produce spectacles out of intense and focused interaction. Indeed, we may see the complex and roughly simultaneous interaction of players' bodies in multi-user games as producing new sorts of physical 'proximity' inviting further theoretical reflection. At the same time, sociability and affective surplus take shape in the collective playing of games, rather than (as is often the case in geographically dispersed music scenes) emerging in communicative activities distinct from those acts in which the key object of attachment is consumed.[30]

In this excerpt, Straw recognizes the possibilities to be found within the environment of games when studying scenes. This comparison between the sociabilities found in games and those in online communications between geographically scattered local music scenes points to differential aspects. The players establish their social relations inside the object of common interest itself: the game. On the other hand, the members of translocal music scenes interact in other environments not directly related to music, like social media. This difference represents materialities that require more attention from scene studies.

This form of mediated communication of scenes that are performed inside games presents similarities and differences to a music scene anchored in the urban space of the city, be it cosmopolitan or not. The developers responsible for the technical and curatorial aspect of the event play the role of producers and technicians in local music scenes, organizing the space where the concert will take place, improving audiovisual aspects, and ensuring the quality of the entertainment offered. On the other hand, musicians' live performances are replaced by the movement of their avatars inside the game, allowing presentation forms that would not be possible in an in-person concert. Finally, the audience can be present in two ways. First, the audience can be part of the in-game

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30. Will Straw, "Some Things a Scene Might Be," *Cultural Studies* 29, no. 3 (2015): 478, https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2014.937947 (accessed May 4, 2022).

concert as spectators on streaming platforms focused on games like Twitch and You-Tube, where the interactivity of the event diminishes, but the chat allows for the possibility of message repetition, which feels like audience shouts in an in-person concert. The second way is as avatars, an experience that seems to be more intense as it represents direct contact between gamers during the musical event, allowing for virtual mosh pits and crowdsurfing, among other performances. In this case, the social aspect of the virtual concert presents itself more intensely than through streaming, as the players can interact among themselves inside the game, creating the feeling of a crowd.

There are cases in other games, however, that do not use music as the object of interest but even so present other elements that characterize scenes, such as the community around *LittleBigPlanet* analyzed by Grimes, who states that:

> The game as artefact, or system, supplies the underlying infrastructures, tools and content upon which the majority of player activities are based. It plays a uniquely powerful role in making the scene manifest, by providing it with the materials, the (virtual) stages and shared forums, as well as the very network through which players interact, congregate, share content and construct meaning.[31]

Once again it is highlighted that in games communication and events happen through the same media. While such characteristics make in-game concerts resemble in-person events, in which communication between members of a local music scene happen in the same space as musical events, it intensifies the difference between the avatar and the physical body. The following analysis will establish parallels between in-game virtual music scenes and local music scenes with online representations. It will also highlight the differences in possible sociabilities staged in big events organized by the music industry in partnership with the games industry and those situated in smaller servers, made in an independent way. Open Pit's example is especially interesting for this article because it combines musical and ludic mediations at the same time, in periodic events that can be understood as a virtual music scene.

ANALYSIS: TRAVIS SCOTT AND HIS ASTROWORLD GET TO *FORTNITE*

Since the changes faced by the music industry in the beginning of the twenty-first century, live music—as well as advertising partnerships—has become a lucrative alternative to compensate for the financial losses that came with the diminishing sales of physical albums. Between 1999 and 2009, the revenue related to selling live music tickets went from $1.5 to $6.5 billion, an amount that by far exceeded inflation and population growth registered in the period.[32] Live music, according to Cresswell-Jones and Bennett, "augments repeatable individualized and deeply personal auditory experience of the solitary listener, and re-frames it and re-energizes it by transforming it into the communal experience with the capacity to engage all of the senses at once."[33]

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31. Sara M. Grimes, "Little Big Scene," *Cultural Studies* 29, no. 3 (August 2015): 380, https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2014.937944 (accessed May 4, 2022).
32. Cresswell-Jones and Bennett, *Digital Evolution of Live Music*, xii.
33. Cresswell-Jones and Bennett, xii.

The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 also presented a challenge to the live music industry in general. Prohibitions against large crowds due to the high transmissibility of the virus made music festivals impossible and delayed tours, entailing a serious crisis to a billion-dollar industry. In this scenario of reforming live music experience formats, the virtual environment, and more specifically games, stood out as it offered a new horizon.

Although the pandemic directed attention to the musical experiences that online games enable, it is important to emphasize that some of the examples analyzed in this article date back to 2018. Even when in-person events were a possibility, music producers were already appropriating games to vent creativity in ways that would be unthinkable in the offline world. Concerts in virtual worlds can be traced back to *Second Life*.[34] In-game concerts were registered by William Cheng in *LotRO* in 2008,[35] and Canadian EDM label Monstercat produced *Minecraft* concerts in 2013.[36] For this reason, it is likely that music events inside games will persist even in a post-pandemic scenario.

The first example analyzed in this article is the spectacle *Astronomical* starring rapper Travis Scott inside *Fortnite*. According to Marcus Carter et. al.:

> *Fortnite* is a massively multiplayer online "battle royale" game in which 100 players compete in a shrinking playable area to be the sole survivor, employing a range of weapons and strategies to overcome their opponents. Since 2018, Fortnite has grown to become one of the most popular digital games in the world, with a reported peak of 10.8 million concurrent players and 250 million registered players in March 2019 (Conditt, 2019). Industry research firm SuperData estimated that the game drew US$2.4 billion in revenue in 2018, "the most annual revenue of any game in history" (SuperData, 2018).... We argue that *Fortnite* and the intersection between Fortnite and other social media video sites such as YouTube and livestreaming sites such as Twitch enable young people to participate in a broad repertoire of information and cultural practices around the game, including dances and knowledge of key players. Engagement with these partner sites enables the development of expertise, the performance of identity, and a sense of social capital.[37]

Fortnite is free to download, and its profit comes from the sale of items inside the game. The first virtual concert inside *Fortnite* happened on February 2, 2019, when DJ

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34. Felipe Gértrudix-Barrio and Manuel Gértrudix-Barrio, "Music in Virtual Worlds. Study on the Representation Spaces," *Comunicar* 19, no. 38 (January 2012): 175–81; Tom Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008); Sheila Whiteley and Shara Rambarran, *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Virtuality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

35. Cheng, *Sound Play*.

36. Ohheyitskris, "A Monstercat Supported Charity Concert. IN MINECRAFT," Reddit, July 9, 2013, https://www.reddit.com/r/Monstercat/comments/1hyg9b/a_monstercat_supported_charity_concert_in/ (accessed April 16, 2022). Thank you to Michael Turnell, who first made me aware of the Monstercat 2013 *Minecraft* concert during our discussions on the Open Pit Discord server. This is so far the earliest record I have of this format of music festival in *Minecraft*. This article does not attempt to provide a full account of the history of in-game concerts; this topic will be pursued in subsequent work.

37. Marcus Carter, Kyle Moore, Jane Mavoa, Heather Horst, and luke gaspard, "Situating the Appeal of *Fortnite* within Children's Changing Play Cultures," *Games and Culture* 15, no. 4 (2020): 454.

Marshmello attracted 10.7 million simultaneous gamers in what was the largest event inside the game so far.[38] On YouTube, the performance has at the time of this writing more than 61 million views.[39] Guns were disabled in the area of the game where the concert took place, known as Pleasant Park, so the gamers could dance and focus on the performance. In a specific moment, in line with the music, the event altered the game's gravity and launched the audience toward the air.

On April 23, 2020, an avatar of rapper Travis Scott performed in *Fortnite* to an audience of 12 million gamers—breaking a new audience record—in a virtual concert that lasted about ten minutes; as of this writing, the video of the event on YouTube has 181 million views.[40] According to developer Epic Games, it was the biggest event of the platform at the time, and in four replays over the next three days, 27.7 million gamers watched the performance a total of 48.8 million times. The event boosted the sale of merchandising, clothing, a Travis Scott in-game skin, action figures, and Nerf guns; it also took the track "The Scotts"—part of the setlist—to number 1 of the 100 most played songs that week on Apple Music and Spotify, the biggest launch on streaming platforms so far that year.[41] The performance was titled "Astronomical" after Scott's 2018 album *Astroworld*.[42]

Beyond the innovation his performance in *Fortnite* presented as to what virtual concerts can offer, the partnership with the game was also a way to unite his personal brand with *Fortnite*'s, leveraging sales of merchandising related to the event. In 2020, a partnership between the rapper and McDonald's in the United States proved itself another lucrative experiment, in a demonstration of Scott's brand's former magnitude at the time.[43]

In an interview with filmmaker Robert Rodriguez published in American magazine *i-D*, Scott is questioned about his business partnerships in 2020 with Christopher Nolan, Nike, McDonald's, *Fortnite*, and PlayStation. The rapper replies:

> You know, it's like with Nike . . . those are the shoes I wear, the shoes I've been wearing since I was a kid. PlayStation—when it was rough, when I was a kid, gaming was an escape. When I was younger and in the studio, sometimes we couldn't really afford to

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38. Gerken, "Fortnite: 'Millions Attend.'"

39. "Marshmello Holds First Ever Fortnite Concert Live at Pleasant Park," YouTube, February 2, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NBsCzN-jfvA (accessed April 8, 2022).

40. "Travis Scott and Fortnite Present: Astronomical (Full Event Video)," YouTube, April 26, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wYeFAlVC8qU (accessed April 8, 2022).

41. Ellise Shafer, "Travis Scott's Multi-Vertical 'Fortnite' Collaboration Continues Record-Breaking Run with Hit Track, Merch Line," *Variety*, April 30, 2020, https://variety.com/2020/music/news/travis-scott-collaboration-fortnite-virtual-concert-merch-1234593613/ (accessed April 8, 2022).

42. Astroworld is also Scott's signature music festival based in Houston since 2018. In 2021, a year after the *Fortnite* appearance, a tragedy during his concert left ten people dead and hundreds injured in what has been defined by the *New York Times* as "one of the deadliest crowd-control disasters at a concert in the United States in many years"; Vimal Patel and Sophie Kasakove, "What to Know about the Houston Astroworld Tragedy," *New York Times*, November 15, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/article/astroworld-festival-what-to-know.html (accessed April 8, 2022).

43. Jon Caramanica, "Travis Scott Meets McDonald's (It's Lit!)," *New York Times*, September 11, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/11/arts/music/travis-scott-mcdonalds.html (accessed April 13, 2022).

eat, you know? So McDonald's held it down. That double cheeseburger got us through those moments. But it's about being able to create an experience, even if these are small things. These collaborations are tools in a way, pieces of everyday life, big brands that allowed us to generate ideas. In 2021 we want to keep evolving, keep generating.[44]

From Scott's answer about his collaborations with big brands, it is possible to conclude that to him, his performance on *Fortnite* was one among various other ways through which consumption is related to popular music. Partnerships between popular music artists and advertising are an everyday practice in the music industry. In this way, Scott's presence in *Fortnite* can be compared to the great offline concerts and music events as a Travis Scott tour itself, for example, attracting thousands of spectators and providing a large—although impersonal—experience.

Just like a large concert provides little opportunity for the building of new long-lasting social bonds because of the lack of repeated encounters among the audience, Scott's concert in *Fortnite* represents a great immersive event more than a virtual music scene. Once the concert starts, there is little interaction among players' avatars inside the game. Compared to the musical livestreams that became common on social media during the pandemic, Scott's performance differs not only in that it unites the aesthetic of the artist to that of the game, but also in that it interacts with the audience in a more intense way.

In the 2019 Netflix documentary *Travis Scott: Look Mom I Can Fly*, the viewer is introduced to the hectic atmosphere of Scott's in-person concerts, with several shots of young—the majority of them male—fans stage-diving, moshing, and interacting intensely with each other.[45] The audience is also introduced to Scott's inspiration for his 2018 Grammy-nominated album *Astroworld*, an homage to the amusement park Six Flags AstroWorld in Houston, Texas, which opened in 1968 and closed in 2005 and was a significant part of Scott's childhood.[46]

The first scene of the movie shows an interview with Scott in which both the interviewer and the rapper are on a roller coaster. When Scott is asked about his newest album at the time, *Astroworld*, the roller coaster keeps running and he answers: "I feel like, at some points in life, you have to just be extreme. And sometimes, you have to take all matters to the extreme. *Astro* was a concept I've been working on since . . . I was about six years old. I feel that . . . it's one of the best moments of my life. At moments, I feel that . . . that these were times that you have to really . . ." At this point, the roller coaster reaches a hill; the interviewer says, "Oh God," Scott laughs, and the scene is cut.

44. Danil Boparai, "Travis Scott: 'I Want to Make a New Sound,'" *i-D*, February 23, 2021, https://i-d.vice.com/en_uk/article/wx8aem/travis-scott-utopia-in-dystopia-robert-rodriguez-spike-jonze-stormi-i-d-magazine (accessed April 13, 2022).

45. *Travis Scott: Look Mom I Can Fly*, Netflix, 2019, https://www.netflix.com/watch/81046796 (accessed April 13, 2022).

46. *Astroworld* debuted at number 1 on Billboard 200 Chart, becoming the artist's second album to achieve this. Keith Caulfield, "Travis Scott's 'Astroworld' Bows at No. 1 on Billboard 200 Chart with Second-Largest Debut of 2018," *Billboard*, August 13, 2018, https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/chart-beat/8469748/travis-scott-astroworld-no-1-billboard-200-album-chart (accessed April 13, 2022).

The video of the performance titled *Astronomical*, available on YouTube, starts with players lifting flaming microphone stands, with their attention focused on an empty stage and a circular big screen behind it. Slowly, the big screen opens to reveal a floating planet, which approaches the stage from the back. On the planet's surface, the audience can see amusement park items like the ones that inspired Scott's 2018 album *Astroworld*; on the center of the planet is a subwoofer, a sound device that transmits lower frequencies and amplifies the bass sound, an important part of Scott's music sonority. In this moment, the track "Sicko Mode" from said album begins. Beside the stage, there is a giant golden head of Travis Scott, which is also present in the album cover shot by photographer David LaChapelle.

As can be seen in Figure 1, from inside the subwoofer erupts a purple ray of light that circles the sky until finally hitting the stage, becoming Scott's avatar in unequal proportion to other players, like a giant in the virtual environment. His arrival produces an impact that raises the audience into the air while Scott stands up and moves around the space of the game, performing the song while players dance, headbang, and lift their flaming microphone stands. At the end of the song, Scott collects pieces of light with his hands, and by clapping he creates another explosion that shakes the audience. At times during the concert, screaming sounds from a crowd appear in the background, helping build up the feeling of an agglomeration around the artist.

The next track, "Stargazing," comes accompanied by a change in the environment, with yellow and red shades giving the impression that the planet from which Scott came is on fire, with small flames falling from the sky towards the floor. On the third
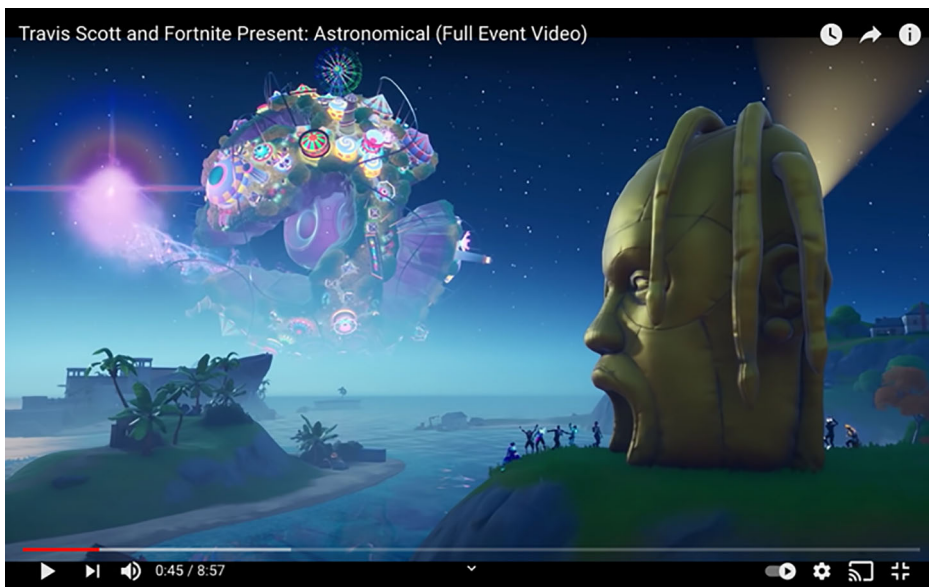

FIGURE 1. Scott's fantasy world approaches the audience, while a beam of light that will later turn into his avatar floats toward the screen. ("Travis Scott and Fortnite Present: Astronomical.")

track, "Goosebumps," almost the whole scenario's lights go out, the only remaining lights being colorful and psychedelic ones coming from Scott's avatar, from the amusement park in his planet, and permeating the game's ambience, as can be seen in Figure 2. The players' avatars themselves change color, their aesthetics changing to fit the show around them. In the transition to the next song, "Highest in the Room," the players are thrown underwater, where they move by swimming while Scott's avatar appears with a helmet floating aimlessly next to his planet. In another implosion, the planet gains green lights and the scenario transforms into outer space, while Scott goes back to a different excerpt of "Sicko Mode." On the last song of the setlist, "The Scotts"—which debuted at the concert and features Kid Cudi—the players fly over the surface of a planet toward stars that coalesce and take the shape of Scott's avatar still wearing the helmet, sitting on a planet while other worlds orbit around him. At last, Scott walks through the planet he came from, while the subwoofer's visual movement becomes more and more intense, until players are propelled once again in a flight through outer space until they reach the event's credits. The insertion of the rapper into the logic of the game makes this a significant example of the intersection between the game and music industries.

Astronomical changed the paradigm of what's expected of in-game concerts. Far from being a temporary substitute for in-person concerts that cannot happen during the pandemic, *Astronomical* presented an innovative way of consuming live music, taking advantage of all creative possibilities that the game environment can offer to the creation of a musical performance. According to Epic Games head of brand Phil Rampulla in an interview with journalist Jordan Oloman, the idea was to make the audience feel like they

FIGURE 2. Psychedelic colors around the avatars during the concert.

were in an "immersive virtual roller coaster." About the creation of the event, Rampulla affirms that:

> We really dug into Travis's world, got to know why he even calls it Astroworld. We understood why Astroworld was meaningful to him, we understood what kind of vibe each song meant, and so we changed the set appropriately to match the emotion and we changed the effects. It was partly developing new features and pushing our engine and our world of *Fortnite* to the max, but also doing it in a way that was super-authentic to all the different facets of someone like Travis and the rich worlds that he creates. No other concert that we're ever going to do is going to look like the Travis show, because that was true to him.[47]

Travis Scott's concert experience in *Fortnite* recalls what Electronic Arts executive Steve Schnur affirmed in 2003, that video games are "one of the most important breakthroughs in the history of the music industry . . . What MTV used to be: ushering trends and creating the new 'cool.'"[48] The success of the track "The Scotts" and the financial return achieved through the sale of the items described earlier reinforce what Schnur's statement represents in the 2020 scenario, seventeen years later.

It also expands on what can be expected from an in-game concert, an immersive experience that allows for a more intimate engagement between audience and performer, in which the game as a medium provides a singular form of involvement with music. By joining live music and game aesthetics, far from being a mere substitute for the in-person concert, in-game concerts allow for new and exciting ways to experience music. In other words, outside game logic, it would be unusual to watch a Travis Scott concert underwater, in outer space, or both. The corporeality achieved through the avatar in an in-game concert intensifies the virtual live music experience by bringing to it a feeling of presence that is not so easily found through social media or television. Additionally, Scott's in-game concert is an example of video games' power to influence music charts, and therefore catapult artists by exposing them to a wider audience.

ANALYSIS: OPEN PIT INDEPENDENT EVENTS IN *MINECRAFT*

In contrast to the mega productions of grandiose and costly musical events in *Fortnite*, independent artists and developers are using *Minecraft* as a more malleable platform to organize music festivals. In *Minecraft* it is possible to construct virtually anything, like a virtual Lego set.[49] It is because of this hybrid characteristic that defining *Minecraft* is such a difficult endeavor. James Newman describes it in the following manner:

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47. Jordan Oloman, "Press Play," *Edge*, May 2021, 90.
48. Tessler, "New MTV."
49. Although initially released for the computer, *Minecraft* can also be found on consoles connected to the television, cell phones, tablets, and in virtual reality. *Minecraft* was developed by Markus "Notch" Persson and released initially on March 17, 2009, being released officially on November 18, 2011, and it was bought by Microsoft in 2014 for $2.5 billion.

"Minecraft is what its players make it. The grandest castles or the simplest shelters are the direct results of players' creativity, ambition, and labor."[50]

Newman highlights the connection between user-generated content (UGC) and online video channels in streaming platforms, as well as the creation of narratives using content from inside the game. Some video series "forgo discussions of construction technique in favor of using *Minecraft* as a virtual stage for the performance of ongoing stories."[51] Newman also points to the importance of recognizing "the use of *Minecraft* as a virtual space within which new forms of narratives and celebrity may be performed and cultivated."[52] And he adds:

> However we view it, it is essential that we recognize that the breadth and depth of UGC created and consumed by communities of Minecrafters includes the digital brickwork of the virtual world and recorded material that is distributed on social media and video-streaming sites such as YouTube. In this way, complex, serial meta-narratives are performed, and *Minecraft* is cast as a flexible toolkit, highly customizable virtual stage, and deeply connected communication platform. Once we consider the diversity of content created by users and consumed, annotated and built on through in-game play and cross-media interaction, this "game" about placing blocks is revealed as a sandbox-style, community-driven, multimedia-content-generation platform.[53]

It is on this platform that volunteer-run, independent virtual-events producer Open Pit presents itself as "leaders in the virtual event space," and their mission is stated as: "to make our work accessible, inclusive, creative, and representative of the incredible and diverse community that we're privileged to be a part of. Our events are open and free for everyone."[54] This mention of a community is one of the indications of the possibility of a music scene developing around these virtual events. It also relates to Newman's definition of existing possibilities in *Minecraft* in regard to the creation of communities.

According to interviews with Open Pit members published online, the first event organized by Open Pit happened in 2018 when, as a joke, Canadian architecture student and music producer Max Schramp decided to host his twenty-first birthday party in *Minecraft*.[55] The event was set up in a friend group in which most were DJs and producers, and while they were expecting 50 attendees, 400 joined, which led to subsequent festivals. In September 2018, they organized Coalchella, and the festival gathered 25,000 people—in total, not simultaneously—and 59 DJs. Four months later, Fire Fest attracted 80,000 gamers. Open Pit is responsible for online events Coalchella, Mine-Gala, Nethermeant, Square-Garden, AETH3 R, and Lavapalooza. In these events,

50. James Newman, "Minecraft: User-Generated Content," in *How to Play Video Games*, ed. Matthew Thomas Payne and Nina B. Huntemann (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 277.

51. Newman, "Minecraft: User-Generated Content," 278.

52. Newman, 281.

53. Newman, 282.

54. "Open Pit," Open Pit, https://openpit.net/. Accessed April 16, 2022.

55. Matheus Fernandes, "Por Dentro Do Mine Gala, Um Festival De Música Em Minecraft," UOL Start, October 19, 2019, https://www.uol.com.br/start/ultimas-noticias/2019/10/19/mine-gala-um-festival-de-musica-em-minecraft.htm (accessed April 14, 2022).

FIGURE 3. SOPHIE's Grammy award. (Gordon, "Best New Music Festival.")

renowned artists such as American Football, as well as the more recent 100 gecs, attract and raise an audience of listeners and fans.

Noisey magazine published an article by Lewis Gordon titled "The Best New Music Festival Is in 'Minecraft'" in January 2019.[56] The article is specifically about Fire Festival—ironically named as a pun on Fyre Festival, a famous example of a failed in-person musical event. On this occasion, artists like Charli XCX, AG Cook, and Umru performed; Gordon reported 5,000 avatars jumping about and interacting with each other.

The festival space was full of rainbows symbolizing the LGBTQIA+ community and the pink, blue, and white transgender community flag. Beyond that, there was an art gallery virtually set up and a sculpture of a Grammy award dedicated to music producer and singer SOPHIE (see Figure 3), a great idol of and influence on this music scene.[57] The festival's structure was constructed by a team of fifty "builders."

Fire Festival raised $1,750.97 for the Trevor Project, an organization that provides crisis and suicide-prevention services to young LGBTQIA+ people under twenty-five. The donation came from selling VIP tickets that gave access to special rooms inside the server and items like band T-shirts. Following bigoted comments posted online by Notch—one of *Minecraft*'s creators—reporter Lewis Gordon "suggested to [Max] Schramp that Fire Festival might be the kind of thing that really pisses Notch off, he

56. Lewis Gordon, "The Best New Music Festival Is in 'Minecraft'," *Vice*, January 17, 2019, https://www.vice.com/en/article/nexje8/the-best-new-music-festival-is-in-minecraft-fire-festival (accessed April 14, 2022).

57. SOPHIE was an influential avant-garde music producer who passed away earlier in 2021. Her passing was mourned by her community and several musicians. Noah Yoo, "Danny L Harle, Arca, Flying Lotus, Grimes, More Pay Tribute to SOPHIE," Pitchfork, January 30, 2021, https://pitchfork.com/news/danny-l-harle-flying-lotus-holly-herndon-more-pay-tribute-to-sophie/ (accessed April 14, 2022). Her friend and music partner AG Cook wrote her a heartfelt eulogy that can be found on his website, http://agcook.com/msmsmsm (accessed April 14, 2022).

replied, 'we love that.'"[58] Open Pit's events in *Minecraft*, however, depend on Microsoft's goodwill, which makes their continuity—just like other events happening inside the game—submissive to the company's interests. Gordon reports:

> The mechanics of listening were slightly convoluted but functioned perfectly. An audio stream from the virtual festival's website broadcast sets from its two stages while players were instructed to switch off C418's extremely chill and excellent *Minecraft* soundtrack that usually plays in the background. Instead, our audio channels were graced with blistering party sets spanning ballroom, grime, screamo and, of course, that *Animal Crossing* edit of Travis Scott's "Sicko Mode." Hudson Mohawke, Iglooghost, and Kai Whiston assumed the glistening, pixelated Angle—not a typo, just a joke about *Minecraft's* boxy environs—and Devil stages alongside PC Music affiliates A.G. Cook, Umru and over 70 other artists.[59]

The music broadcast at the festival came from a website or Discord server outside the game, but when joined by the gaming inside *Minecraft*, the result was the unique experience of the virtual music festivals organized by Open Pit. In some of the festivals, Discord is also used to connect DJs and the audience. This subversion of the game's initial intention is an example of the software's collective appropriation to satisfy the gamers' interests that recalls the demoscene mentioned earlier. Leaving the tranquil atmosphere of C418's soundtrack behind and replacing it with the hectic environment of the music genres cited in the previous quote transformed the *Minecraft* experience into a place of quick interaction, prompting avatar mosh pits in front of the stage set inside the server.

Reporting from MineGala, one of Open Pit's festivals, Brazilian journalist Matheus Fernandes describes what he can see in the server: a giant sculpture of Japanese virtual popstar Hatsune Miku, Super Mario, a huge can of energy drink, ironic references to capitalism.[60] "Beyond the scenario and music, there are various other activities in the space, from raids in which the fans organize and run from one side to the other facing big bosses with names like 'Jeff Bezos' [see Figure 4], 'e-boy' or 'Ronald McDonald', to costume contests, with winners like a group of Garfields or a cosplay of Charli XCX's new album cover."[61] In this example specifically, it is interesting to observe the virtual music festival intersecting with game logic, going beyond the live music experience to include the ludic aspect of the game that is hosting it. Attending MineGala was just as much about watching live music in the game as it was about playing *Minecraft* collectively.

MineGala also featured an art gallery curated by fashion student Elena Fortune inside the mansion where the two theme stages—Industry and Plant—were located. Through various floors, there were sections such as computer art, album covers, and traditional painting methods. In an interview with Fernandes, Elena states that "art

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58. Gordon, "Best New Music Festival." Max Schramp, also known as music producer SLEEPYCATT, is part of the Open Pit team.
59. Gordon.
60. Fernandes, "Por Dentro do Mine Gala."
61. Fernandes. Translation by the author.

FIGURE 4. Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos as a *Minecraft* villain. (Fernandes, "Por Dentro Do Mine Gala.")

appears in many forms, everywhere we look. *Minecraft* is definitely a vehicle for art. There is a lot of value and potential in an online virtual block building program, amply accessible and with millions of blocks. There is a lot to be explored."[62] In MineGala, the audience was dressed in skins referencing game and anime characters, and the music traveled through a mixture of music genres like hardcore, eurodance, hip-hop, mainstream pop, and PC Music. At one point, a classic of Brazilian funk was played, MC Bin Laden's 2014 track "Lança de Coco." British producer GFOTY, who performed at the festival, stated to Fernandes that "I don't play *Minecraft*, I live *Minecraft*."[63]

During Nether Meant in April 2020, reporter Julia Alexander describes on The Verge her difficulties with getting on the server.[64] When doors opened at 6:00 p.m. ET, Alexander was caught up in the hurry to enter the server, which then overloaded, and many couldn't initially join the event. Those who couldn't get in, according to her, turned to the Twitch livestream where Open Pit was broadcasting from the "floor."

Her description of being outside the server watching it on Twitch is relevant to this work: "It felt like being stuck in the coat check line, hearing the opening act play their set and feeling the vibrations pulsating the floor under your feet, but not being able to see the actual show."[65] This statement reinforces the idea that the intensity of experiencing the in-game concert inside the actual game is a stronger affective experience than merely

62. Fernandes.

63. Fernandes. Translation by the author.

64. Julia Alexander, "I Tried to Crash the VIP Area at American Football's Minecraft Concert," The Verge, April 15, 2020, https://www.theverge.com/2020/4/15/21219197/minecraft-american-football-concert-anamanaguchi-openpit-fortnite-festivals (accessed April 16, 2022).

65. Alexander, "I Tried to Crash the VIP."

watching it through a less interactive platform. Things changed, however, when the server could keep up with the number of visitors. Alexander writes that "when everything was working, the show went from something happening on a screen to an actual immersive event." She continues:

> Something special happened when American Football went on at 11:20 PM, though. The venue chilled. *Minecraft* avatars stopped jumping around as the pluck of guitar strings from "Stay Home" started playing. People in *Minecraft* started spamming the chat tool, thanking American Football for their music. Some wrote messages about American Football saving their lives; others spoke about heartbreak. It was like the forum page of an emo site was being projected on the wall while the band played. And, just like that, the moment of clarity that comes from being in a sea of people when your favorite band takes the stage arrived.[66]

Alexander's reference to online message boards dedicated to a music genre—in this case, emo—recalls the definition of a virtual music scene. The difference here is that these scene members are not only exchanging feelings and ideas about music but also sharing a virtual, immersive live-music experience. The interactions between scene members in other social media that spawn from these events, such as Twitter and Discord, open space for the creation of affective bonds.

In May 2020, Cat Zhang interviewed for Pitchfork some of the volunteers responsible for Square-Garden festival. Ary Warnaar—cowriter and guitarist in chiptune music band Anamanaguchi—makes an affirmation that is very significant to this current exploration: "The servers being jammed feels like waiting in line outside a club, the chat spamming a certain word or phrase feels like a crowd chant. We're not doing this 'because we can't do it IRL,'" he adds. "We're doing it because it could never happen IRL."[67]

While *Fortnite* concerts are large but impersonal experiences, Open Pit's *Minecraft* concerts are easier to customize in a way that truly represents the virtual music scene they attract around the periodical festivals. In the same article, Open Pit member and music producer Umru Rothenbert describes the difference between events in *Minecraft* and *Fortnite*: "An event like Travis Scott's Astronomical has to be run by the developer of Fortnite—no Fortnite player could host a Travis concert. Whereas in Minecraft, there's a lot of flexibility for the community to organize things." Robin Boeler, also a part of Open Pit, describes how the event creators built the house portrayed on American Football's first album in *Minecraft*, turning it into a stage and a dance floor (see Figure 5).

The event creators explain that as festivals gather around seventy artists, it would be impractical to have the shows performed live.[68] For this reason, musicians send an audio file of twenty minutes that the organizers use to create the performance. Open Pit's events also have a direct relation to the growing popularity of the hyperpop music genre.

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66. Alexander.

67. Cat Zhang, "How the Hell Do You Throw a Music Festival in Minecraft?" Pitchfork, May 1, 2020, https://pitchfork.com/thepitch/how-the-hell-do-you-throw-a-music-festival-in-minecraft/ (accessed April 16, 2022).

68. Zhang, "How the Hell."

Artists like Charli XCX, Dorian Electra, and 100 gecs, important names within the genre, are usually on festival lineups.

Hyperpop's popularity can also be connected to the official playlist by the same name launched in August 2019 on Spotify with 100 gecs on its cover. The playlist has, as of this writing, gathered more than 212,000 thousand likes and has propelled many young musicians' careers. For example, quinn is an independent artist frequently featured on the playlist whose track "Bad Idea" was streamed on Spotify more than a million times.[69] Frequently cited as a prominent act within hyperpop, 100 gecs has developed alongside Open Pit's events, even premiering some of their songs in their festivals. According to Robin Boeler:

> 100 Gecs has played everything we've done. I remember they debuted "ringtone" at one of our first events. I specifically asked them, "Do you guys want to play a set together as 100 Gecs?" They had released music as 100 Gecs years before, but they weren't actively working as 100 Gecs. I think that pushed them to work on more music together. Not that I want to take credit for them putting out an album, but a lot of the songs off *1000 Gecs* were premiered at our events. They set a standard: A lot of artists have followed suit by premiering new music specifically for our events.[70]

All of Open Pit's events are free, and the organization collects donations for charity. The contrasts between Open Pit in *Minecraft* and the music industry in *Fortnite* provide a rich panorama for understanding the intersection between music and games, as well as the possibilities for virtual music scenes in these spaces.[71] The fact that Open Pit events

69. Justin T. Gellerson, "How Hyperpop, a Small Spotify Playlist, Grew into a Big Deal," *New York Times*, November 10, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/10/arts/music/hyperpop-spotify.html (accessed April 16, 2022).

70. Zhang, "How the Hell."

71. This panorama was also noticed by Jordan Oloman in his article for *Edge* magazine.

happen with some frequency and on a collectively constructed platform within which developers work voluntarily is more characteristic of a music scene than the large music events in Fortnite, which, in spite of their importance to the development of new forms of music consumption, do not seem to represent many possibilities for the construction of social bonds. The community around hyperpop and Open Pit's events is very present in social networks such as Twitter, as well as through the communication channel Discord, originating novelty and therefore impacting the broader music landscape because of a virtual music scene inside *Minecraft*.

CONCLUSION

Considering Pereira de Sá's definition of a music scene, it is possible to establish several parallels between this concept and the community around Open Pit's events in *Minecraft*. Open Pit's events, for example, a) happen in the global environment of *Minecraft*; b) are marked by the sharing of aesthetics related to the internet and the virtual space; c) boost, among other music genres, the popularization of hyperpop; d) involve youth groupings increasingly disinterested in genre and gender definitions; e) are not anchored in an urban environment, but instead their participants occupy bubbles in social media that function as demarcated territories, inside of which concertgoers interact with people who share similar life-worlds; and f) are marked strongly by the mediations provided by the internet and *Minecraft*.

In an article for *Edge* magazine, Jordan Oloman brings up another comparison between Open Pit and a local music scene:

> The Open Pit team often have to play the role of a virtual backstage runner, doing everything from talking artists through the process of downloading the game to teleporting them onstage in time for their sets. Rothenberg, whose responsibilities include A&R, recalls the prep for Nether Meant: "Members of American Football needed to call me out and ask, "How do I move forward?" After a little tutelage, most of the band performed on the stage as their pixelated personas, while a pre-recorded mix played out via the web-based Mixlr live streaming service. And for the members who couldn't figure it out? "Some of them also had their kids playing as them."[72]

The hypothesis defended here is that the musical events in *Fortnite* are similar to large analogue concerts, while Open Pit's independent festivals gather people that meet through avatars in events that have happened periodically; such frequency allows for the forming of interpersonal relations that would qualify it as a virtual music scene. Open Pit's members refer constantly to a community, and the recent and growing music genre hyperpop seems to have a centrality in these events; these facts match the characteristics that Pereira de Sá recognizes as a music scene.[73]

This article is just an initial exploration of what is a vast world of possible virtual music scenes. Fernanda Carrera's "intersectional roulette" represents an essential methodological

72. Oloman, *Press Play*, 85.
73. Pereira de Sá and Janotti, "Will Straw: Cenas Musicais."

tool for deeper analyses about the above-described phenomena.[74] In her proposition, Carrera suggests that to understand a social phenomenon fully, it is necessary to take into consideration aspects such as gender, race, class, weight, geolocation, disabilities, sexuality, age, and any others that might become relevant to the subjects in question. The class aspect, for example, is the one that immediately comes to mind. Attending events depends on access to expensive technology and good internet access, which to many people is a privilege. How do other intersectional categories affect the presence and sociability of the players in these scenes? This question must be raised as the research deepens.

Interesting questions arise also around the possible concepts of the body as it relates to the audience and artists' performance in this kind of virtual event. Each platform will have its own particularities, and just as in a city, they will influence the interactions between members. VRChat and Roblox are examples of other environments where musical events take place, and where music genres like robloxcore and digicore originated.[75]

As such, there are still questions to be answered: How do sociabilities occur inside this kind of virtual music scene? What is the influence of the ludic aspect on them? These are questions that can be answered through virtual ethnography inside these spaces, influenced by the work of Christine Hine, Tom Boellstorf, Kiri Miller, and William Cheng.[76] The same way that music scenes studies mapped cities and music's relation with territory, the current moment proves to be propitious for studies directed towards mapping of music scenes set in the digital space, inside games. ∎

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74. Fernanda Carrera, "Roleta Interseccional," *E-Compós*, July 2020.

75. Jordan Oloman, "Staying in to Go out: Exploring the VRChat Club Scene," *NME*, May 31, 2021, https://www.nme.com/features/gaming-features/exploring-vrchats-underground-nightclub-scene-2950650 (accessed April 16, 2022); Kieran Press-Reynolds, "How Roblox Sparked a Chaotic Music Scene," *New York Times*, May 16, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/16/arts/music/roblox-video-game-music.html (accessed April 16, 2022); Billy Bugara, "Digicore Captures the Angst of Coming of Age during a Global Pandemic," *i-D*, April 20, 2021, https://i-d.vice.com/en_uk/article/n7bw3z/digicore-music-scene-profile-hyperpop (accessed April 16, 2022).

76. Christine Hine, *Virtual Ethnography* (London: Sage, 2003); Boellstorf, *Coming of Age in Second Life*; Kiri Miller, *Playing Along: Digital Games, YouTube and Virtual Performance* (Oxford, England: Oxford University, 2012); Cheng, *Sound Play*.

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