

Vaporwave Is Dead: Sound, Community, and Metadata in Internet Music Genres

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Abstract

Emerging in the early 2010s, vaporwave is a music genre whose history and content are inseparable from the Internet. Vaporwave's style hinges on an intense nostalgia for the music and visuals of the 1980s and 1990s, including corporate background music (or "Muzak"), commercial advertisements, and obsolete consumer electronics. The genre's earliest producers released albums freely and pseudonymously—facilitated by file-distribution sites like Mediafire and Bandcamp—and its accompanying community formed through discussions on web forums like 4chan and Reddit. What started as a narrowly-defined style focused on edited loops of Muzak and smooth jazz quickly ballooned into something broader: an umbrella genre encompassing a wide range of sonic and visual references to the aforementioned late-20th century touchstones. Both the genre and its community continue to thrive to this day.

This dissertation analyzes how the concept of genre shapes the musical experiences of online listeners. Diverging from prevailing narratives that suggest genre is now irrelevant in popular music, I argue that genre remains a core concern of numerous Internet subcultures, including vaporwave. As one of the oldest and most popular of these subcultures, vaporwave makes an effective case study, demonstrating how genre functions as sound, as community, and as metadata in online circles. Thanks to social media, the discussions within a genre community are more accessible than ever; I use these discussions to demonstrate how the creation of a genre is messy, complicated, and full of debates that are both agonizing and enjoyable for their participants. And though Internet genres develop more rapidly than their offline

counterparts, with community members at a greater physical remove, they share a similar developmental trajectory.

The structure of this dissertation follows that trajectory, beginning with the fringe network of a few musicians witnessed in chapter one. An initial flurry of press attention in 2012 defined key stylistic qualities of vaporwave and publicized a few prominent producers, garnering an enthusiastic reception among users of web platforms like 4chan. And though vaporwave seemed to fade by the end of the year, an emerging community continued to take shape. A new wave of producers incorporated new stylistic influences, ushering new listeners into the community and triggering arguments over the genre's "true" definition throughout 2013.

Chapter two sees these arguments continue into 2014, when the term "future funk" becomes codified as a label for new, dance-oriented vaporwave built from disco samples. And though some community members saw future funk as a dilution of vaporwave's original purity, more of them welcomed in with open arms. A growing acceptance of future funk, combined with the rise of popular record labels and the creation of a dedicated genre forum on the social media site Reddit, contributed to a robust community by 2015.

Chapter three shows how that community was stretched to its limits in 2016. From the outside, fascist propagandists sought to repurpose vaporwave for their own ends; from the inside, a popular producer and record-label operator antagonized listeners beholden to strict ideals of what vaporwave should sound like. All the while, the genre's popularity continued to boom through the spread of popular Internet memes, bringing in people with less investment in the scene's history. As a response to all three

of these developments, the community's traditionalist wing reasserted itself, paving the way for a genre more often focused on its past than its present or future.

Chapter four explores the extent of that past-oriented mindset, documenting a community focused on celebrating great albums of the past and discussing well-established subgenres. On the former front, many listeners collected new pressings of old classics on vinyl; on the latter front, an elaborate taxonomy of labels allowed community members to categorize releases across vaporwave's wide stylistic range. These practices allowed the community to re-stabilize after the upheaval of 2016, and what emerged was a genre scene tight enough to successfully organize its first pair of offline festivals: 100% Electronicon.

For my parents

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Introduction

Genres are dead, and Spotify killed them. As the world's largest music-streaming service, Spotify's explosive growth during the 2010s drove the music industry's transition from digital sales to on-demand listening. Where listeners previously paid 99 cents to purchase one file from a platform like Apple's iTunes, they now paid \$9.99 a month for access to a database of millions of files. More than the price of music changed, though; Spotify's interface prioritized playlists of their creation over traditional release formats like albums and singles. Some playlists covered a specific genre or artist, but many of the most popular focused instead on function and mood, like the ubiquitous "chill" playlists built for unobtrusive background listening. Critics of Spotify charge that these playlists diminish the importance of musicians' work, creating passive listeners who "[think] less about the artist[s] or album[s] they are seeking out, and instead [connect] with emotions, moods and activities, where they just pick a playlist and let it roll." According to this argument, such a listener prioritizes the familiar and the predictable, shunning sounds that invite too much attention. As a result, "Spotify's obsession with mood and activity-based playlists has contributed to all music becoming more like Muzak"—aural wallpaper.¹ For these critics, Spotify's runaway success not only changed how we listen to music, the service changed why we listen, how we use (or don't use) categories, and with whom we listen.

According to its critics, Spotify minimizes the social dimensions of musical experience in favor of an atomized listening model. Listeners have a seemingly boundless array of options—free from the old constraints of genre or listening

¹ Liz Pelly, "The Problem with Muzak," The Baffler, December 4, 2017, <https://thebaffler.com/salvos/the-problem-with-muzak-pelly>.

community—and can fluidly move among them. Musicians soon began capitalizing on this mode of listening, releasing songs that borrowed from emo, electronic, and hip-hop without circulating in the communities that traditionally accompany each genre. Artists like Lauv and Sasha Sloan earned millions of streams through prominent placements in Spotify playlists, further incentivizing aspiring artists to create music in this genre-blending, easy-listening vein.² Of course, Spotify is only one player in the streaming market. But whether on Spotify, Apple Music, Snapchat, or TikTok, the argument holds: music in the streaming era is far less beholden to traditional genre categories. This narrative regularly appears in popular music criticism at the turn of the 2020s, where writers pit a pluralistic, digital vanguard against restrictive, outmoded institutions. “Genre was once a practical tool for organizing record shops and programming radio stations, but it seems unlikely to remain one in an era in which all music feels like a hybrid, and listeners are no longer encouraged...to choose a single area of interest.”³ As streaming platforms became the dominant players in the music market, older institutions became much less able to shape audience listening preferences. Given the ability to navigate between genres in milliseconds, why would anybody choose otherwise?

In these accounts only vestigial wings of the music industry clings to taxonomies, with the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences and the magazine *Billboard* serving as two high-profile examples. The former structures their Grammy Awards according to genre, often drawing ire for their classifications. When rapper and singer

² Liz Pelly, “Streambait Pop,” *The Baffler*, December 11, 2018, https://thebaffler.com/downstream/streambait-pop-pelly?utm_campaign=bonus&utm_source=big-mood-machine-pelly.

³ Amanda Petrusich, “Genre Is Disappearing. What Comes Next?,” *New Yorker*, March 8, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/03/15/genre-is-disappearing-what-comes-next>.

Tyler, the Creator won Best Rap Album in 2020 for his stylistically diverse *IGOR*, he noted “it sucks that whenever we, *and I mean guys that look like me* [emphasis added], do anything that’s genre-bending or anything, they always put it in a rap or urban category.”⁴ According to Tyler, the Recording Academy is all too eager to designate the work of black artists as rap, even when the album in question (like *IGOR*) fits far better in other genre categories. Racial essentialism also drove a recent classificatory decision by Billboard, the magazine responsible for music industry charts. After the track “Old Town Road” by Lil Nas X appeared on both R&B/hip-hop and country charts in 2019, Billboard de-listed the song from the latter, arguing that it “[did] not embrace enough elements of today’s country music to chart in its current version.”⁵ This decision came in spite of a country radio landscape where similar fusions of hip-hop and country by white artists like Florida Georgia Line are quite common.

Beyond Billboard’s racial assumptions, their de-listing of “Old Town Road” from the country chart lent credence to journalists’ conviction that music genres were obsolete. The very title of a *New Yorker* article championed the song’s role in the “Overdue Death of Genre,” further suggesting that efforts to classify “Old Town Road” were “attempts to preserve a system of genres that has been crumbling for many years, and to affirm the primacy of a chart structure that is no longer relevant.”⁶ In marketing his track, however, Lil Nas X demonstrated a more utilitarian view of genre. On

⁴ Michele Amabile Angermiller, “Tyler, the Creator Calls Urban Grammys Category ‘a Politically Correct Way to Say the N-Word,’” *Variety*, January 26, 2020, <https://variety.com/2020/music/news/tyler-the-creator-grammys-rap-urban-category-voting-1203481571/>.

⁵ Elias Leight, “Lil Nas X’s ‘Old Town Road’ Was a Country Hit. Then Country Changed Its Mind,” *Rolling Stone*, March 16, 2019, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/lil-nas-x-old-town-road-810844/>.

⁶ Carrie Battan, “‘Old Town Road’ and the Overdue Death of Genre,” *The New Yorker*, April 8, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/old-town-road-and-the-overdue-death-of-genre>.

distribution platforms Soundcloud and iTunes, Lil Nas X tagged “Old Town Road” as a country song rather than hip-hop because of the former’s smaller listener base. Given a smaller audience, any degree of success would translate to greater visibility on country charts, allowing him “to manipulate the algorithm to push [his] track to the top.”⁷ Lil Nas X may have been straddling stylistic boundaries with “Old Town Road,” but he still understood the relevance of genre to online marketing.

That relevance is inseparable from the design of individual web platforms. Soundcloud and iTunes feature genre metadata far more prominently than services like Spotify, offering tags and categories as a primary mode of discovering music. Soundcloud even advises users that “tracks tagged with a relevant genre will be found more easily, as they rank higher in the results.”⁸ For all the discourse surrounding the death of genre at the hands of streaming, Soundcloud *incentivizes* musicians and listeners alike to experience music through those categories. They’re not the only site to do so, either; Bandcamp, a site especially popular for independent electronic and rock musicians, gives similar advice on the wisdom of using genre tags.⁹ To be sure, Soundcloud and Bandcamp are much smaller than the likes of Spotify. Given the latter’s de-emphasis of genre and other metadata in their design, it’s plausible that such categories exert less sway on many young listeners than they did for previous generations. But such a possibility is far different from the prevailing narrative that genres are now completely obsolete.

⁷ Leight, “Lil Nas X’s ‘Old Town Road’ Was a Country Hit. Then Country Changed Its Mind.”

⁸ “Adding a Genre and Tags When Uploading a Track,” Soundcloud Help Center, November 5, 2021, <https://help.soundcloud.com/hc/en-us/articles/115003564328-Adding-a-genre-and-tags-when-uploading-a-track>.

⁹ “Bandcamp Artist Guide,” Bandcamp, accessed November 29, 2021, <https://bandcamp.com/guide>.

This dissertation argues that, though they may be less relevant now for a greater number of people, genres did not die with the onset of streaming. Instead, they moved online and underground, structuring niche communities whose members are deeply invested in definitions of their respective genres. These listeners bond over shared perspectives of the genres they love and debate conflicting interpretations: camaraderie and conflict within the same online spaces. As Simon Frith noted, “trading pop judgments is a way to ‘flirt and fight,’”¹⁰ and online genre communities demonstrate how both acts hold meaning and pleasure for their members. Community debates are more than just a social practice, they are the very process by which music communities and genres are formed. And the average community member’s role in genre formation can be observed more directly now than ever, thanks to the Internet. Where genre histories once relied on journalistic accounts, scholars can now directly access the sentiments of community members far more easily and at a far greater scale than before. Narratives of genre death in the age of streaming overlook the intensity of these musical practices and sentiments, particularly on platforms other than Spotify.

Vaporwave, one of the longest-running and most popular of these online genres, emerged in 2011 and 2012 on distribution platforms like Soundcloud and Bandcamp. After an initial flurry of press coverage highlighted vaporwave’s ironic appreciation of 1980s and 1990s popular culture, a new wave of listeners and producers seized the term, rapidly expanding the genre’s stylistic boundaries. In the process, they created a network of online record labels and discussion forums that survives today, culminating in vaporwave’s first two *offline* festivals in 2019. What first seemed a flash in the pan

¹⁰ Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 6.

became a mainstay of underground Internet culture—one full of disputes over definitions, community, and ownership. As one Internet genre among many, vaporwave challenges the prevailing notion that music streaming has eliminated the contemporary relevance of genre categories. Rather, genre persists in online communities and on web platforms that prioritize metadata, making the category central to the musical experiences of enthusiasts worldwide.

Existing Literature

Online music genres occupy the intersection of sound, community, and metadata. The first two categories are well-represented in genre literature, with scholars since the 1990s developing a perspective centered on musical communities and the sonic traits they deem important. In *Studying Popular Music*, Richard Middleton described popular culture as a site of continual class struggle, with its uses and meanings in perpetual flux. For Middleton, these debates occur within an organizing principle of *articulation*: “by combining existing elements into new patterns or by attaching new connotations to them.” While no musical or social qualities are inherently tied to class position, their meanings *are* dictated by the unique class foundations of a given application of these two articulating principles.¹¹ Middleton applied this theory to a variety of musics, but he rarely analyzed the concept of genre itself. However, his interest in how musical traits combine with social forces informed later genre scholarship.

¹¹ Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular Music*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2002), 8–9.

In *Performing Rites*, sociologist Simon Frith argued that genre is central to value judgements in popular music, and that these judgements themselves are a core part of participating in popular culture. Frith insisted that genre is not a simple matter of stylistic differentiation. While he hardly dismissed style as irrelevant, Frith ultimately noted that sonic features vary too widely within many genres to qualify as a sole defining characteristic.¹² Instead, Frith forwarded five primary rules that constitute a genre: formal and technical; semiotic; behavioral; social and ideological; commercial and juridical.¹³ All of these qualities appear in arguments for or against a piece of music, and all of these arguments constitute the social processes that create a genre.

Record companies are eager to profit off these debates, and in doing so they presume a great deal about a genre's listenership. Frith himself noted this, observing how labels seek to create and manage an ideal genre fan through their marketing techniques.¹⁴ Fellow sociologist Keith Negus furthered these insights with an entire monograph on the subject: *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures*. Negus concurred with Frith's emphasis on social processes, defining genres as *cultures* that arise from the intersection between commercial structures, listeners, musicians, and historical forces.¹⁵ While Frith's argument moved among these parties, Negus paid particular attention to corporate management, detailing their extensive use of genre in the signing and marketing of musicians. Listeners have mercurial tastes, and these fluctuations in consumer opinion directly affect music industry revenue. According to Negus, labels identify and create consumer markets in response to this uncertainty, seeking as much

¹² Frith, *Performing Rites*, 86.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 91–93.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁵ Keith Negus, *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures* (London: Routledge, 1999), 29–30.

as possible to guarantee stable returns on investments. This market research—along with corresponding business structures, marketing campaigns, and artist catalogues—occurs within the organizing rubric of genre, with an assumption that certain types of people buy certain types of music.¹⁶ For record companies, genre and social position are inextricable. Different genres are for different groups of people, and marketing departments expect (or hope for) minimal overlap.

Industry assumptions often clash with the creative practices of musicians, who often ignore or even resent attempts to reduce their work to a stable genre category. In *Dissonant Identities*, Barry Shank provides an ethnographic history of the live music communities in Austin, Texas, arguing that for decades the city's music was the purview of the honky-tonk: a performance space rife with antimodern critiques of hierarchy. Now, though, "the marketing strategies of the recording industry have permeated the organization of live music performance," segmenting musicians into genres that can be more easily quantified and managed.¹⁷ Similarly, in *Segregating Sound*, Karl Hagstrom-Miller notes that, before the music industry imposed racialized categories onto their work, black and white musicians of the rural southern United States played a vast range of pop and folk styles.¹⁸ And in *Genre in Popular Music*, Fabian Holt uses his ethnographic work among Chicago jazz musicians to argue that even earlier scholarly definitions of genre (like Frith's) implied a solidity of boundaries that does not exist.¹⁹

¹⁶ Ibid., 47.

¹⁷ Barry Shank, *Dissonant Identities: The Rock'n'roll Scene in Austin, Texas* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1994), 240–41.

¹⁸ Karl Hagstrom-Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 1–2.

¹⁹ Fabian Holt, *Genre in Popular Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 6.

The porous nature of genre reflects the ever-shifting nature of musicians' social networks, which may suggest that drawing *any* general conclusions is a futile effort.

However, some throughlines emerge from these fluid practices. Holt identified a set of processes common to genres' developmental trajectories, falling under two basic categories: foundation and negotiation. First, *foundation* entails the creation and maintenance of social and discursive networks. These networks often emerge from the work of "center collectivities"—those groups of insiders deemed knowledgeable, powerful, or otherwise influential within a given network. From these networks emerge the conventions that define the genre, which include sonic codes/signs, shared social values, and established musical practices. After the establishment of these networks and conventions come the continual *negotiations* of a genre's boundaries as it encounters mainstream culture, the music industry, and a global listenership.²⁰ Holt's portrayal of genre balanced the relevance of musical characteristics with the primacy of community in defining the concept. Online genres demonstrate this balance in action, exhibiting Holt's processes of foundation and negotiation in a near-instant, public manner. Contrary to the romanticism often associated with the concept of "community," these two processes are messy and contested, sparking outrage and offense as they create a given genre.

User activity on Internet forums and social media platforms is often highly visible, sometimes (depending on a site's longevity) dating back over a decade. Such an accessible record of community activity makes discursive understandings of genre more relevant than ever. In *Categorizing Sound*, musicologist David Brackett forwarded a

²⁰ Holt, 20–29.

discursive, “genealogical” view of genre that echoes Middleton’s theory of articulation, arguing that no genre exists beyond expressions or invocations—“citations”—of genre. For Brackett, expressions or invocations of genre are in fact the genre itself: “genre is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results.”²¹ Brackett’s debt to Middleton is clear here and throughout the remainder of *Categorizing Sound*, where he focuses on moments of generic flux for a process of continuity and gradual transformation that Middleton might term articulation.²² Where Holt analyzed the communities that constitute genres, Brackett identified the discursive processes at work within those communities—a highly relevant approach for online genres.

Though online communities are innumerable, music scholarship has yet to explore them as thoroughly as adjacent fields like media studies and anthropology. In these disciplines, rich bodies of literature attest to the ways online communities parallel and diverge from their offline equivalents, ultimately asserting that the two are much more similar than not. Howard Rheingold’s *The Virtual Community* heralded the subject in effusive terms. Writing in 1993, Rheingold used his titular phrase to describe the bonds he formed with others online: “people in virtual communities do just about everything people do in real life, but we leave our bodies behind.”²³ Rheingold’s use of the term “real life” suggests a divide between online and offline interaction, where the former eschews the corporeal concerns of the latter. Many Internet enthusiasts of the early 1990s shared a similar perspective, “[focusing] on the revolutionary potential of

²¹ David Brackett, *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Music* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016), 13.

²² *Ibid.*, 129–33.

²³ Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1993), 3.

raising consciousness and building community through computer networks.”²⁴ Online communities exist in part within the minds of their members, often becoming (as for Rheingold) an important source of meaning for those involved. As Benedict Anderson noted, “all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact...are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished...by the style in which they are imagined.”²⁵ Online communities are imagined through digital communication technologies, and though the following decades of scholarship complicated hopes for an online utopia—demonstrating how digital technology and its accompanying practices are far more connected to our physical selves than not—such hopefulness reminds us of how intensely felt these social bonds can be.

Since the 1990s, scholars have explored how online communities function as extensions or iterations of offline identities. Much of this literature discusses the importance of digital technology for members of marginalized groups, such as racial and ethnic minorities. “Ethnic media have historically benefitted from the development of new media technologies...and have used these technologies to connect within and across communities.”²⁶ These communities frequently span nations and continents, allowing far-flung members of an offline identity group to connect. “These social media platforms also allow the members of traditionally oppressed groups to find their voices, express their issues, cultivate communities, create homes away from home, construct

²⁴ Alice Marwick, *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 52.

²⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised (London: Verso, 2006), 6.

²⁶ Sherry Yu and Matthew Matsaganis, eds., *Ethnic Media in the Digital Age* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 3.

their cultural identities in multiple ways, and simply express facets of their identities.”²⁷

Though these identities often morph as a result of their circulation on digital platforms, they existed before and independent of the technology in question.

Similarly, Jessa Lingel documents how offline countercultures like body-modification enthusiasts, DIY punks, and drag queens established communities online.²⁸ All three groups existed before the proliferation of Internet technologies but found new ways to gather and form social bonds. And in a musical context, global participants of the Sacred Harp singing community signal their group membership by “engaging in prescribed social and aesthetic codes.”²⁹ These codes circulated worldwide on sites like YouTube and Facebook but originated in the southern U.S. during the 19th century. Though Internet technologies shaped the Sacred Harp singing tradition, they did not play host to its creation.

This literature attests to the porous boundaries between offline and online communities, where the former can easily blend into the latter (perhaps to the point of rendering the distinction moot). At first, born-digital music genres might seem to have little in common with this trend; yet as they develop, listeners and musicians often seek to bring online genres offline. Just as offline communities for body modification and Sacred Harp singing branched onto Internet platforms, communities formed on the same types of platforms follow an inverse trajectory into physical gatherings like musical

²⁷ Ahmet Atay and Margaret D'Silva, eds., *Mediated Intercultural Communication in a Digital Age* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 3.

²⁸ Jessa Lingel, *Digital Countercultures and the Struggle for Community* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2017), 1–2.

²⁹ Ellen Lueck, “‘Through Every Land, By Every Tongue’: Sacred Harp Singing Through a Transnational Network,” in *Congregational Music-Making and Community in a Mediated Age*, ed. Anna Nekola and Tom Wagner (New York: Routledge, 2016), 125.

performances. Early 1990s depictions of a disembodied virtual world rarely align with people's uses of Internet technologies.

The spread of digital communication technology accompanied broader changes in social interaction, too. Even beyond the Internet, communities have often become less binding and less prescriptive, with a greater (though certainly not unlimited) ability for group members to diverge from behavioral norms or depart altogether. Individuals have more mobility to determine their community membership but are more unmoored, with Internet socialization constituting one example of this trend. "The virtual world is simply another manifestation of the search for belonging in a world where previous certainties of identity and shared experience have been lost."³⁰ And online, Tony Blackshaw and Beth Fielding-Lloyd argue, communities are only sustained through communication: "they are only kept alive as long as their individual members deem them important."³¹ David Brackett's concept of genre citation not only applies to online music genres, it applies to the social organizations that gave them life. Invocations of a given community *constitute* the community, whether those citations are dismissive or celebratory. Volatile disputes often sustain a group just as well as good-natured agreements.

Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman describe the present social paradigm as one of "networked individualism." Unlike past eras where people's social lives were governed by large hierarchies or regional and local institutions, each individual is now at the center of their own social world. Ties between individuals vary in strength and degree of

³⁰ Tony Blackshaw and Beth Fielding-Lloyd, "Virtual Communities," in *Key Concepts in Community Studies*, by Tony Blackshaw (London: Sage, 2010), 111.

³¹ Blackshaw and Fielding-Lloyd, 15.

commitment, and they are easier to both form and sever than before. Online communities typify this new arrangement “oriented around looser, more fragmented networks that provide succor.”³² But while Rainie and Wellman are neutral on the value of this change, other scholars are more critical. In *Alone Together*, Sherry Turkle laments how Internet technologies have lowered our expectations of one another, leading to shallower, more fleeting social bonds. Turkle argues that communities by definition cannot be present online. “Communities are constituted by physical proximity, shared concerns, real consequences, and common responsibilities. Its members help each other in the most practical ways...What do we owe each other in simulation?”³³ For Turkle, a lack of obligation reduces online networks to something less than a community.

Scholars often note the ambiguous nature of the term “community,” and the physically-dispersed nature of online networks further muddies the water. The applicability of the term is particularly unclear on platforms where users’ offline identities are obscured by pseudonyms or total anonymity. The social media site Reddit—a mainstay of vaporwave discourse—requires users to create pseudonyms but otherwise asks for little of their personal information. In his book *Understanding Reddit*, Elliott Panek suggests that “the de-emphasis on individual identity and the [large] size of many subreddits make it unlikely that these connections are as reciprocal as they would be on social platforms.”³⁴ Though this observation supports Turkle’s criticisms, Panek adopts

³² Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman, *Networked: The New Social Operating System* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2012), 8.

³³ Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 239.

³⁴ Elliott Panek, *Understanding Reddit* (New York: Routledge, 2022), 85.

a more neutral stance. He suggests that smaller networks within Reddit can function as communities while larger groups participate with less personal investment and frequency.³⁵ Members of these two camps often hold radically different priorities and perspectives, leading to frequent debates over the “correct” form of engagement with the community’s topic. Per Brackett, these debates are not peripheral to online communities; instead, they help *constitute* them even as they risk tearing them apart. Communities contain harmony and unrest, and the constantly-shifting nature of online networks requires attention to both qualities.

In keeping with the anonymity prevalent throughout vaporwave’s community history—including on Reddit—the demographic makeup of the community is difficult to determine. Popular depictions of heavy Internet users often assume maleness and whiteness, and this particularly holds true for those who use sites like Reddit and 4chan, where some users have organized for misogynist and white supremacist ends. However, this dissertation seeks to avoid assumptions that the vaporwave community is a demographic monolith. Not only are gender and race impossible to determine from forum posts, but anecdotal evidence suggests that vaporwave producers and listeners are a bit less homogenous than one might expect. Two of the genre’s founders, Ramona Xavier and Robin Burnett, are a trans woman and nonbinary person, respectively, and my observations at two in-person festivals held in 2019 further suggested at least some demographic diversity. At a crude estimate, each event had a 65/35 ratio of men to women, and around one-third of the Los Angeles audience were listeners of color. Overall, the vaporwave community might skew more white than it

³⁵ Panek, 88.

skews male, but my lack of knowledge about online listeners (particularly those *not* at the festivals) makes that difficult to confirm. Then again, the community has a long history of using gendered and homophobic insults to berate each other. I'm ultimately uncertain of the vaporwave community's demographic makeup, therefore gender and race are not significant categories of my analysis of the genre.

Though not all vaporwave listeners envisioned themselves as members of an online community, many explicitly did, and this dissertation follows suit in using the term to describe the social networks that constituted a genre. Reminiscent of Benedict Anderson's description of "imagined communities," anthropologist Tom Boellstorff argues that "community has never been reducible to locality," and online genres demonstrate this fact.³⁶ Nancy Baym concurs, identifying five qualities shared by online groups and common definitions of community: sense of space, shared practice, shared resources and support, shared identities, and interpersonal relationships.³⁷ Online genre communities share all these qualities, and in combination with the aforementioned literature they show how online communities form and how freely they intermingle with aspects of offline life.

Unlike research on music genres and digital communities, very little cultural scholarship addresses one of the cornerstones of online social activity: metadata. Succinctly defined as "data about data," metadata describes or otherwise categorizes any item in an information system. In a digital context, metadata ranges from user-created hashtags on sites like Twitter, which allow people to connect their posts to

³⁶ Tom Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtual Human* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 180.

³⁷ Nancy Baym, *Personal Connections in the Digital Age* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2010), 75.

others with the same metadata, to timestamps noting when a piece of content was posted or edited. A song or image is not metadata; information *about* that song or image is metadata. This type of information is omnipresent online, structuring countless communities and their understanding of a given topic. Metadata contributes to all five qualities of online communities identified by Nancy Baym, acting as both a mechanism by which people meet and a component of the space within which they interact.

Metadata long predates the Internet, though. Record collectors and media fandoms of the mid-20th century often prized minutiae others might deem trivial. The former might have examined a label's catalog numbers; the latter might have noted differences in the production crew between seasons of a TV show. In both cases, metadata served as a source of meaning and enjoyment for those involved, and these practices continued with the spread of digital communication technologies, which made it easier than ever to edit and share metadata. In a musical context, the rise of digital audio players encouraged listeners to assemble libraries of files, and those particularly dedicated to metadata consistency could edit relevant information as they saw fit. "Collecting music started to become an information management activity."³⁸ Record collector and fan practices fit neatly with this emerging paradigm.

Just as listeners edited metadata of their personal music files, they contributed metadata to crowdsourced online databases. Sites like Discogs and Rate Your Music (RYM) allow users to add or alter a release's metadata, with fields ranging from track titles to catalog numbers to cover art. Today Discogs hosts information for over 15 million releases, contributed by over 600,000 users, and remains one of the most

³⁸ Onur Sesigür, *Playlisting: Collecting Music, Remediated* (New York: Routledge, 2022), 32.

popular sites for collectors of physical music formats to buy and sell items.³⁹ Rate Your Music, meanwhile, has nearly 5 million releases and about 850,000 user accounts, as well as ample resources for musical discovery, compiling recommendations based on site and user tastes.⁴⁰ Both of these sites' emphasize metadata's role in musical experience, and depending on the listener, the very act of contributing to either database can be its own reward.

Discogs distinguishes between "genre" and "style": the former denoting broad umbrella categories like rock and electronic, the latter a subgenre nested within the former.⁴¹ When editing a release's metadata, users can alter both genre and style, selecting appropriate labels from the site's list of categories. Each genre and style has a dedicated page with a description of its musical and historical characteristics, and in keeping with Discogs' focus on physical media collection, each page displays the genre or style's most-collected releases. Though genre metadata can facilitate musical discovery through these popularity metrics or through sorting releases by release date, Discogs' design uses genre more as a descriptive tool than a method of exploration. Cataloguing, collection, and documentation remain the foci, and some users have added thousands of releases to Discogs with that goal in mind.

In contrast, Rate Your Music (RYM) more thoroughly integrates genre metadata into its design. As on Discogs, any user can vote on genres that apply to a given release, and each genre that receives majority approval appears on that release's main

³⁹ Discogs, "About," Discogs, accessed March 27, 2022, <https://www.discogs.com/company>.

⁴⁰ MarilynRoxie, *Rate Your Music*, March 1, 2022, https://rateyourmusic.com/discussion/rate-your-music/statistics-of-rym/18/#post_8257587.

⁴¹ Discogs, "Database Guidelines 9. Genres / Styles," Discogs, May 25, 2018, <https://support.discogs.com/hc/en-us/articles/360005055213-Database-Guidelines-9-Genres-Styles>.

page. Once classified, a release appears on recommendation charts relevant to each genre, providing one of the primary methods of discovering music on the site. Each genre has a unique page that contains a description of its defining characteristics, top-rated releases by the site's userbase, a graph charting the genre's popularity over time, and a hierarchy outlining "parent" and "child" genres that preceded or emerged from the genre in question. Given all of these features, users directly benefit from robust site metadata, and many contribute untold hours towards that end. Contributions include fierce debates over the merits of a particular genre: whether or not one applies to a particular release; how to best describe one; if a new one even merits inclusion in the database. These discussions in part constitute RYM as a community, and their intensity reveals how meaningful metadata is for community members.

Discogs and RYM are both well-known in the Internet circles from which vaporwave emerged. In the sections of 4chan and Reddit dedicated to music, both sites often surface—Discogs as a historical resource, RYM as a platform for cultivating and displaying one's taste. Even producer Ryan DeRobertis, the most popular musician from vaporwave's early years, referenced his use of both sites.⁴² But despite metadata's prominent role in many listeners' musical lives, it has received little attention in music scholarship. Even beyond the discipline, writing on metadata primarily circulates in information science and related fields, where the subject is often framed in technical terms. Two topics constitute notable exceptions: hashtags and fan fiction (fanfic). And

⁴² Ryan DeRobertis, Vaporwave Ambassador-Turned-Future Funk Heartthrob Talks about Change: A Chat with Skylar Spence, interview by A Noa Harrison, Online, October 2, 2015, <https://www.popmatters.com/195684-vaporwave-ambassador-turned-future-funk-heartthrob-talks-about-chang-2495504907.html>.

while neither map completely onto the vaporwave community's use of metadata, they each provide helpful contrasts that highlight how metadata function in musical contexts.

Hashtags are a form of metadata commonly used on social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram. They categorize the post in question within a broader conversation—linking to every other post that includes the same hashtag—and can serve expressive purposes should a user include a more idiosyncratic term. Michele Zappavigna notes hashtag's unique role among types of metadata: "Traditionally, metadata was separated from an information object (e.g. hidden from the view of users of an information system, or separated from the main body of a text). However, hashtags are assimilated into their host texts, and can perform particular functional roles in those texts."⁴³ Hashtags are embedded *within* a piece of content, not positioned astride, and are overtly used as a method of social organization. Sarah Florini's *Beyond Hashtags* uses the metadata form as a starting point for her analysis of black digital networks in the U.S., noting how the technology offers opportunities and limitations for those seeking community.⁴⁴ Descriptive metadata like genre tags lack the same level of embeddedness as that of hashtags, but both operate as a powerful tool in organizing social groups online.

Metadata also thrives in online fan-fiction ("fanfic") communities, where writers create original stories based off commercial media properties that circulate within a given fandom. Scholars in media studies have long written about fanfic, starting with Henry Jenkins' 1992 book *Textual Poachers*, and the decades since have seen

⁴³ Michele Zappavigna, *Searchable Talk: Hashtags and Social Media Metadiscourse* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 15–16.

⁴⁴ Sarah Florini, *Beyond Hashtags: Racial Politics and Black Digital Networks* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

academics analyze the subject from myriad angles. Fanfic metadata, though, has received comparatively little attention despite its role organizing stories on popular sites like FanFiction.net and Archive of Our Own. Amid this gap in the literature, Shannon Johnson identifies three types of descriptive tags used by fanfic sites: free tagging, controlled vocabulary, and hybrid folksonomy. Free tagging is, like hashtags, completely user-created; controlled vocabulary is completely defined by a site's administration; hybrid folksonomy combines the open nature of free tagging with the standardization provided by site staff, who subsequently connect user tags based on their use.⁴⁵ Though they encourage adherence to widely-known genre terminology, Bandcamp and Soundcloud use a free tagging model. The eventual coherence of accompanying genre communities, then, can't be a sole byproduct of metadata structure because users are free to use whichever tags they please. Structure comes in part from the community discourse accompanying the metadata.

As Johnson referenced, community discourse often develops a "folksonomy": a taxonomy that arises from user-created tags rather than institutional designation.⁴⁶ Literature on metadata often describes folksonomies as valuable counterparts to the categories created by libraries and archives, with some scholars further elaborating on the term's original definition. Gene Smith identifies four key characteristics of folksonomies: "tagging is done independently; tags are aggregated; relationships are inferred; any inference method is valid."⁴⁷ Most relevant to online communities, Smith

⁴⁵ Shannon Fay Johnson, "Fan Fiction Metadata Creation and Utilization within Fan Fiction Archives: Three Primary Models," *Transformative Works & Cultures* 17 (2014), <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2014.0578>.

⁴⁶ Thomas Vander Wal, "Folksonomy Coinage and Definition," July 24, 2004, <https://vanderwal.net/folksonomy.html>.

⁴⁷ Gene Smith, *Tagging: People-Powered Metadata for the Social Web* (Berkeley: New Riders, 2008), 84.

emphasizes how users determine the significance of these tags: “the value of these derived relationships is that they’re based on the language and usage patterns of real users.”⁴⁸ As some genre communities grow, members develop an ever more extensive system of subgenre categorization, with some tags entering common usage and others remaining niche entities. Both community discussion and the tags themselves shape these patterns, building the genre folksonomy through the years.

Community discussion of folksonomic tags is often contentious, with users disputing one another’s interpretation of a given term. Avery Dame analyzes how transgender users on the social media site Tumblr navigate the definitional open-endedness of free tagging:

As the folksonomy settles into a stable, ontological organization through repeat use, the vocabulary options available to trans users are limited. Limited vocabulary ultimately prompts user debate over tag definition...Without a structuring apparatus to maintain social norms, users implemented horizontal discipline to resolve the embedded uncertainty around tag definition.⁴⁹

Online genre communities often follow a similar trajectory, with some subgenre tags reaching a critical mass of popularity that limited their conceptual flexibility. “Ultimately, repeat usage begets ossification: prominent tags emerge as “stable consensus” choices with similarly static definitions.”⁵⁰ And in music communities, listeners sometimes even seek to enshrine their categories in online resources that operate with a degree of top-down, institutional recognition.

⁴⁸ Smith, 85.

⁴⁹ Avery Dame, “Making a Name for Yourself: Tagging as Transgender Ontological Practice on Tumblr,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 33, no. 1 (2016): 34, <https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2015.1130846>.

⁵⁰ Dame, 31.

Discogs and Rate Your Music both recognize vaporwave as a coherent musical genre, and both incorporate much of the community's folksonomy of subgenres. Discogs lists nine subgenres on its page describing vaporwave, and though none of these appear as metadata on an individual album's page, their inclusion on such a popular resource speaks to their coherence for listeners outside the genre community.⁵¹ Rate Your Music takes an even more granular approach. The site's more extensive genre-tagging system affords a nested "tree" of subgenres, with vaporwave one branch of a broader meta-genre simply termed "vapor."⁵² And unlike on Discogs, Rate Your Music users can tag individual albums with any of the nine folksonomic labels.

Though Discogs and Rate Your Music differ in their specificity of genre metadata, both behave according to Shannon Johnson's definition of a hybrid folksonomy, melding the freedom of users' tags on other sites with the stability of their own administrative control. In outlining the process of adding a new style tag to Discogs' database, one staff member noted that "I reserve the final say in whether a style is added or not."⁵³ And though Rate Your Music's more open nature is clear in their statement that they "seek consensus and common ground as a community when genres are submitted to determine what belongs in the database...ultimately, the acceptance or rejection of genres is up to the discretion of site staff."⁵⁴ These two sites act as a legitimating force, crystallizing years of discursive tension present in community

⁵¹ Discogs, "Vaporwave Music," Discogs, accessed March 28, 2022, <https://www.discogs.com/style/vaporwave>.

⁵² Rate Your Music, "Vapor," Rate Your Music, accessed March 28, 2022, <https://rateyourmusic.com/genre/vapor/>.

⁵³ nik, *Discogs*, March 11, 2010, <https://www.discogs.com/forum/thread/207034>.

⁵⁴ Rate Your Music, "Add a Genre," Rate Your Music, August 21, 2021, <https://rateyourmusic.com/wiki/Music:Add%20a%20genre>.

forums and in genre metadata. Though media scholarship has often neglected metadata, online genre communities show just how interrelated the two subjects are.

Offline Similarities

Emerging from the overlap of sound, community, and metadata, vaporwave ultimately adheres to many trends found in past, offline genres. Chief among these similarities is a resonance with the developmental trajectory identified by sociologist Jennifer Lena in her book *Banding Together*. Lena defined genre as “systems of orientations, expectations, and conventions that bind together industry, performers, critics, and fans in making what they identify as a distinctive sort of music.”⁵⁵ Musical qualities weren’t irrelevant for Lena, but her focus was squarely set on the social networks that constitute a given genre. Lena identified four common types of genre formations—avant-garde, scene-based, industry-based, and traditionalist—and twelve attributes relevant to them all, such as codification of performance conventions and enforcement of genre boundaries. Each of the four genre formations exhibits a given attribute differently, and these differences collectively define the nature of each formation. For example, avant-garde genre forms define their boundaries against established music while traditionalist genre forms do so against internal deviations from the norm.⁵⁶ Lena argued that these four genre forms constitute a trajectory that the vast majority of genres follow. This “AgSIT” model begins in the avant-garde, moves through scene- and industry-based forms, and concludes with traditionalist communities. Lena

⁵⁵ Jennifer C. Lena, *Banding Together: How Communities Create Genres in Popular Music* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 6.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

was careful to note, however, that this trajectory is descriptive rather than prescriptive; some genres start or end at different points in the sequence or follow a different path entirely.⁵⁷ Like Fabian Holt, Lena strove for an understanding of large-scale trends while still allowing for generic qualities that differ from or even contradict those same trends.

Those trends structure this dissertation, with vaporwave clearly charting a trajectory across Lena's model, beginning at the avant-garde stage before progressing to scene-based and then traditionalist stages. The genre started among a fringe smattering of experimental musicians but quickly developed a small, devoted community of followers; as that community grew it became more invested in preserving the genre's history and aesthetics, with many listeners remaining vigilant against perceived threats to tradition. Vaporwave's adherence to these three stages brings digital genres in conversation with their analog predecessors, challenging any presumption that the Internet entirely altered how genres function.

However, even as Internet genres share many similarities with those found offline, they depart from Lena's framework in three key ways. First, Internet genres often bypass Lena's industry-based stage. Lena describes how "a common feature of the transition from the Scene-based to the Industry-based genre is the assertion of market dominance by major record corporations," and as noted by Negus, genre has long served a powerful role in how major labels market and develop new talent.⁵⁸ For example, the ascendance of "grunge" at the turn of the 1990s provided labels a new term with which they could market young rock bands as a bold departure from 1980s rock aesthetics. However, when the remix genre "black MIDI" reached its peak

⁵⁷ Ibid., 24.

⁵⁸ Lena, 40–41.

popularity in the mid-2010s, no assertion of market dominance occurred. To the extent that major labels may have actually discussed black MIDI, their lack of investment surely had much to do with the genre's style, which centered on MIDI arrangements of video game, anime, and pop music with notes in the millions (or more). Though black MIDI tracks do contain identifiable melodies, they are surrounded and interrupted by cacophonous clusters of notes that threaten to overwhelm the tune. And true to the genre's name, artists work with only MIDI instrument presets, which are often mocked as chintzy or otherwise "cheap" sounding in broader music discourse. The genre's abrasive style and reliance on copyrighted material limited its market viability, but neither of those traits prevented black MIDI videos from earning hundreds of thousands of views on YouTube.

A second difference from Lena's model centers on the decline of critical authority in the past decade. Given a publishing landscape accessible by only a fraction of listeners, music critics once held a great deal of sway in coining and popularizing new genres. Mainstream visibility allowed them to spotlight genres in the Scene-based stage and, as with "New Pop" or "New Music"—synthesizer-based British pop of the early 1980s—facilitate many transitions to the Industry-based stage. As Theodore Cateforis notes in *Are We Not New Wave?*, years of publicity from British magazines like *Spin* and *New Musical Express* combined with the recent creation of MTV to successfully market New Pop acts to American audiences. In the summer of 1983, *Billboard* even dedicated a twelve-page feature to this "New Music," signaling the industry's preferred umbrella term for the new crop of artists. Today, media publishing is far more accessible, and journalists' power to name a musical style or movement is greatly

diminished, residing with musicians able to describe their music however they wish or, on occasion, with Spotify. Though famously genre-agnostic at the most popular scale, the streaming service does sometimes highlight emerging Internet scenes, such as their 2019 creation of a “hyperpop” playlist featuring producers of noisy, distorted pop. The term hyperpop originated among artist metadata collected by the company, but the label only gained wider traction after the creation of Spotify’s playlist.⁵⁹ Audiences and streaming services now serve the role once filled by critics, with the latter only exercising that ability on niche, emerging fronts.

Finally, a third difference from Lena’s model is that online genres rarely exist long enough to reach the Traditionalist stage. The communities that create genres often dissipate amid the loose social bonds at the breakneck pace of online communication. Potential community members can more easily follow their whims and leave a platform or social group, which makes it more difficult for genres to last long enough to reach a Traditionalist or even Industry-based stage. Before the advent of the Internet, genres in the Industry-based stage often garnered pushback from listeners who sought to preserve the music’s earlier, Scene-based qualities. Lena discusses bebop jazz and bluegrass as two representative examples, identifying how scholars, enthusiasts, and nonprofit organizations worked to “protect” their respective genres from the purportedly corrupting influence of the music industry.⁶⁰ Online, however, listeners move much more quickly and freely between social groups—and thus genres. By the time hyperpop stabilized into a (somewhat) coherent genre, listeners and critics had already moved on

⁵⁹ Ben Dandridge-Lemco, “How Hyperpop, a Small Spotify Playlist, Grew Into a Big Deal,” *The New York Times*, November 10, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/10/arts/music/hyperpop-spotify.html>.

⁶⁰ Lena, *Banding Together*, 45.

to “digicore,” a style more indebted to hip-hop and spotlighted by a Soundcloud editorial playlist.⁶¹ Hyperpop’s fate is uncertain, but at the time of this writing there exists no prominent movement to “preserve” the hyperpop aesthetic. Online music communities hurtle ever forward.

Vaporwave bridges the gap between offline and online genres, demonstrating how both follow a familiar trajectory from fringe avant-garde to niche scene. Yet while most online genres wane after this point, vaporwave persisted, its traditionalist movement triggered by the genre’s relative popularity. Vaporwave became a mainstay of mid-2010s Internet humor, spreading far beyond its genre community through numerous memes. Faced with an influx of community outsiders less invested in genre history, preservation-minded listeners sought to “defend” vaporwave from newcomers. Unlike Lena’s Traditionalist stage, the “corrupting” influence came from casual citations of the genre, not music industry exploitation. This shift in power from a concentrated industry to a mass of Internet users suggests future genres’ longevity depends on their ability to “cross over” to more mainstream spaces. And once a genre becomes the purview of popular memes and streaming-platform playlists, its accompanying community either closes ranks or moves on.

Trajectory

I analyze vaporwave as a music genre articulated and negotiated through sound, community, and metadata. These processes all occur via online social channels—both

⁶¹ Sophie Walker, “404 Error, Genre Not Found: The Life Cycle of Internet Scenes,” Complex, November 4, 2021, <https://www.complex.com/pigeons-and-planes/life-cycle-of-internet-genres-scenes-hyperpop-digicore-cloud-rap>.

celebratory discussions and impassioned debates. Though popular music studies as a discipline embraces the socially-constructed nature of genres, this dissertation highlights just how complex and messy the construction of a genre truly is. Innovators, committed fans, newcomers, and opportunistic trolls alike found pleasure and purpose in communicating online about vaporwave. And despite each group's differing motives, they all played a part in sustaining an Internet music genre for the past decade.

Chapter one covers vaporwave's quick growth from a small avant-garde praised by journalists to a nascent scene supported by amateur producers and enthusiastic listeners. Though vaporwave's earliest releases date from 2010 and 2011, critics began covering the genre in 2012, with UK writer Adam Harper and staff at music site Tiny Mix Tapes providing the first definitions of the emerging style. Those definitions centered on the work of producers known as Vektroid and INTERNET CLUB, who pitched-down and looped samples of 1980s and 1990s background music such as smooth jazz and New Age. Critics largely cast these samples as ironic comments on consumerism and taste, and that association with irony mirrored the praise of early listeners on the Internet forum 4chan. Vaporwave's popularity continued to spread, and people eventually began creating online record labels and hosting digital festivals—hallmark institutions of a music scene. This popularity included a massive redefinition of vaporwave's style and rhetoric, with the community moving beyond a sole emphasis on sluggish loops and sarcasm to incorporate dance tempos and sincere nostalgia.

Chapter two details how similar vaporwave was to offline music scenes, beginning with how vicious the community infighting over genre boundaries became. Amid a period of stylistic expansion, detractors of non-traditional vaporwave viewed

many new releases as lazy and uncreative, questioning how artists like SAINT PEPSI and Luxury Elite belonged within the genre. Yet on distribution sites like Bandcamp, these producers and a growing array of netlabels tagged their music as vaporwave, and fans were happy to discuss the albums as such, ensuring their eventual success in definitional debates. Many discussions migrated from 4chan to a dedicated Reddit forum, where vaporwave would be the sole topic of discussion rather than one among many. This “subreddit” served a similar function to zines in independent analog scenes, offering a space for listeners to discuss the genre and issues pertinent to it.

Where vaporwave had become a fairly stable community by 2015, chapter three documents how the following year’s controversies gave rise to a more traditionalist mindset—one seeking to preserve vaporwave from internal agitators, fascist appropriators and clueless dilettantes. David Russo, head of leading vaporwave netlabel Dream Catalogue, attempted to create a new subgenre called “hardvapour” that favored abrasive textures, hyper-masculine rhetoric, and Eastern European aesthetics. Russo’s provocations stemmed from his long-standing frustration with community debates over genre boundaries, and hardvapour’s aggression inflamed those tensions once more. These tensions were further heightened by a broader surge in online fascist propaganda, which included the attempted co-optation of vaporwave by neo-Nazis and other far-right activists. Finally, vaporwave’s spread through popular Internet memes brought new waves of unfamiliar people to the community, many of whom invoked the genre with less investment in its aesthetic framework. Faced with these challenges to definitional stability, many community members re-asserted the boundaries present in 2015, championing popular releases and producers of the past.

Chapter four sees the vaporwave community more fully embrace a nostalgia for its own past and along lines similar to a pop culture fandom, with a heavy investment in classification and physical objects. By 2018 listeners had developed an extensive taxonomy of subgenres, and while these categories allowed an immense deal of stylistic variety, most people insisted on categorizing releases according to this system. Some listeners and producers even attempted to coin new subgenres, though these were rarely adopted by the wider community. Community members also sought re-releases of classic albums on physical formats, with many showcasing their collections of cassettes and vinyl. This digital genre's commitment to physical merchandise reached an apex during vaporwave's first two offline festivals—100% ElectroniCON—where musicians and vendors sold music, clothing, pins, and other items. Yet removed from the metadata required by digital platforms, the festivals' physical immediacy suggested the possibility of a more fluid understanding of genre within the community.

Music genres were not killed by the onset of streaming. They continue to thrive in underground social circles, where participants find value and meaning in musical style, community, and metadata. These are not idyllic communities, however; as they construct a genre through continual citation, members often bicker and attack one another, sometimes seeming to enjoy the disagreement as much as a given song or album. Genres have long worked this way, and vaporwave demonstrates all these developmental qualities through its history, illustrating a valuable historical continuity. Though they evolve at a far greater speed and circumvent older sources of industry authority in new ways, online genres are far more like offline genres than not.

CHAPTER 1: AN AVANT-GARDE ARRIVES

In April 2012, the producer INTERNET CLUB released an album titled *REDEFINING THE WORKPLACE*.⁶² In keeping with its titular evocation of business seminars and corporate cultures, the album's artwork depicted a complex of office buildings with distant employees dotting the horizon line. INTERNET CLUB likely repurposed this image from its origin as an architectural rendering since the art shares the surreal qualities typical of those design mockups. The buildings appear blurry, a triangular shadow in the bottom-right corner seems blatantly artificial, and the entire juxtaposition of shades and textures (to say nothing of the people) simply looks "off." Despite some convincing gestures towards an existing physical environment, the image still contains too many incongruities to seem real—stuck in the uncanny valley between the natural and the artificial.



REDEFINING THE WORKPLACE, 2012.

INTERNET CLUB extended the corporate theme with their choice of track titles, each written in capital letters and trumpeting jargon like "SYNERGIZE." And most, if not all, of these songs were built from the more mundane sounds of commerce. "UTILIZE

⁶² INTERNET CLUB, *REDEFINING THE WORKPLACE*, Digital, 2012, <https://internetclub.bandcamp.com/track/utilize-your-impact>.

YOUR IMPACT” features a descending piano melody and synthesized percussion, evoking (if not outright sampling) the type of background music used by customer service call centers. This type of music already connotes tedium thanks to its association with lengthy telephone holds, but INTERNET CLUB purposefully exacerbates this tedium, repeating an audio loop of less than ten seconds across a three-minute track. Even more jarring, the loop is intentionally imprecise, beginning and ending in the middle of measures. Each new loop abruptly jumps back to the beginning, interrupting the listener’s ability to track the song’s pulse. Along with aggressive panning of the sounds across the stereo field, all these qualities make “UTILIZE YOUR IMPACT” a disorienting piece, simultaneously boring and abrasive.

INTERNET CLUB’s work on *REDEFINING THE WORKPLACE* and elsewhere soon become known as early examples of a new genre called vaporwave. The genre emerged from music-streaming and file-distribution sites in the early 2010s, when pseudonymous producers circulated loops of mood music for free and with little contextual information. On blogs and in user-created metadata tags, listeners began referring to this and similar music with the term “vaporwave.” These albums and audiences existed on the fringe of popular music discourse, constituting a fledgling genre in the Avant-Garde stage of Jennifer Lena’s model. Music critics began covering vaporwave in 2012, identifying the genre’s sonic attributes, key producers, and thematic content. These genre citations lent further coherence to the category, but just as vaporwave stabilized as a legible genre, its nascent community panicked. Listeners feared stylistic repetition and overexposure had killed the genre, and many assumed vaporwave would vanish just as quickly as it appeared.

Instead, 2013 brought a second generation of musicians who dramatically expanded vaporwave's aural palette while still including the genre in their tags. Producers incorporated elements of hip-hop, R&B, and dance music, bringing new fans to vaporwave while rankling more traditional members of the community. These groups of listeners clashed over the "appropriate" definition of vaporwave, with each mention of the genre further resuscitating a term many deemed dead less than a year ago. What was once an amorphous set of loosely-connected individuals had become a genre in Lena's Scene-Based stage: a genre full of passionate debates over musical quality and ingroup membership. Though the community formed online, with members physically isolated one from one another and able to communicate in an instant, these dynamics paralleled those found in offline genres.

A Suspicious Press

When music critics first identified vaporwave in 2012, it seemed the latest in a string of online genres "discovered" by the press. Previous years were full of these "microgenres": stylistic categories based on a few artists who released their music and gained popularity online. Journalists treated these Internet genres as the equivalent of offline music scenes, assuming the same degree of social interaction found in the latter.⁶³ However, artists often had few non-stylistic connections with one another, leading a given category to collapse within a year or two of its creation. In an era of declining critical authority, music outlets were less able to sustain a new genre after willing one into existence. By the time vaporwave appeared, the very idea of an

⁶³ Lena, *Banding Together*, 35.

Internet-born genre had become suspect—tainted by association with overzealous music critics. Much of the press either derided or ignored vaporwave, expecting it to vanish as quickly as past genre fads.

The earliest recorded use of “vaporwave” as a genre label dates back to an October 2011 post on a Polish blog named Weed Temple, where the author reviewed an obscure album by a producer working under the alias Girlhood. The album, *Surfs Pure Hearts*, was released for free on music-distribution site Bandcamp, a platform popular among independent and amateur musicians.⁶⁴ The blogger categorized Girlhood as a vaporwave producer, occupying an increasingly popular middle ground between psychedelic drone and chillwave. According to this definition, vaporwave was “too varied and beat-based to be considered the first and too abstract and not...[catchy enough] to be considered the latter.”⁶⁵ The sustained tones of drone music had a long history dating back to the 1960s, while the genre chillwave was a far more recent concern. And though the blogger’s definition of vaporwave might not bear much resemblance to future definitions, their allusion to chillwave proved apt.

Chillwave enjoyed a brief stretch of popularity in the late 2000s, constituting one within a continuum of what Georgina Born and Christopher Haworth term “nostalgia genres.” Throughout the 2000s, an increasing number of producers began creating works that, whether through emulation or overt sampling, evoked electronic musics of decades past. Hauntology harked back to midcentury British synthesizer soundtracks, particularly those created by the BBC Radiophonic Workshop, hypnagogic pop

⁶⁴ Girlhood, *Surfs Pure Hearts*, Digital (HolyPageRecords, 2011), <https://holypagerecords.bandcamp.com/album/surfs-pure-hearts>.

⁶⁵ Jakob Adamek, “Review: Girlhood - Surfs Pure Hearts (Holy Page, 2011),” *Weed Temple* (blog), October 13, 2011, <http://weedtemple.blogspot.com/2011/10/review-girlhood-surfs-pure-hearts-holy.html>.

experimented with 1980s pop and the sonic artifacts of audiocassettes, and chillwave adapted hypnagogic pop's interests to more traditional song structures.⁶⁶ Critics—particularly UK writers with connections to experimental-music magazine *The Wire*—played an essential role in the emergence of the former two genres. Mark Fisher first used “hauntology” in 2005, describing how the label Music Box released music whose samples conjured “lost programmes, uncomissioned series, [and] pilots that were never followed-up.”⁶⁷ Fisher theorized hauntology as an aesthetic of “lost futures,” one where “the electronic sounds produced between the 1950s and the 1990s *remain* sonic signifiers of the future.” In a technological landscape where sonic relics of the past live on and are easily sampled by contemporary musicians, “what is mourned most keeningly in hauntological records...is the very possibility of loss.”⁶⁸ Fisher suggested that this collapse of linear time was cause for concern—proof that people had become incapable of forming new cultural memories.

Where hauntology dealt with memory on a mass scale, hypnagogic pop explored the topic on more individual fronts. Writing for *The Wire* in 2009, critic David Keenan first coined the genre to describe musicians like James Ferraro, who sampled 1980s pop culture like the film *Ghostbusters*. As opposed to the social implications Fisher drew from Ghost Box, Keenan portrayed hypnagogic pop in overtly personal terms, as a “[way] of understanding the structure of your own personal reality by going back to the

⁶⁶ Georgina Born and Christopher Haworth, “From Microsound to Vaporwave: Internet-Mediated Musics, Online Methods, and Genre,” *Music & Letters* 98, no. 4 (November 2017): 601–47, <https://doi.org/doi:10.1093/ml/gcx095>.

⁶⁷ Mark Fisher, “Unhomesickness,” *k-punk*, September 21, 2005, <http://k-punk.abstractdynamics.org/archives/006414.html>.

⁶⁸ Mark Fisher, “The Metaphysics of Crackle: Afrofuturism and Hauntology,” *Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music* 5, no. 2 (November 2013): 42–55, <https://doi.org/0.12801/1947-5403.2013.05.02.03>.

formative voices of your youth and treating them as gateways through which you can access altered states.”⁶⁹ For Keenan, hypnagogic pop was an overtly *psychedelic* concern, one facilitated by the ease with which producers could sample the sounds of the past. Fisher’s and Keenan’s arguments quickly became canonical reference points for their respective genres, and both hauntology and hypnagogic pop would exert considerable influence on early treatments of vaporwave as a nostalgic, surreal form.

Last on Born and Haworth’s continuum of “nostalgia genres,” chillwave was the most immediately accessible of the three, using 1980s nostalgia for hazy, mellow grooves instead of muffled, abrasive loops. Chillwave was closely associated with independent rock music (indie) and its corresponding “hipster” subculture. Hipsterism was best known for its frequently ironic stance towards cultural styles and products, and the term chillwave was no different, originating as an ironic commentary on genre categories by the popular blog Hipster Runoff. In 2009, the blog defined the style as “[sounding] like something that was playing in the background of ‘an old VHS cassette that u found in ur attic from the late 80s/early 90s.’”⁷⁰ This description shares much in common with Keenan’s definition of hypnagogic pop, yet chillwave’s use of familiar song structures led to a much wider listenership. Within months of Hipster Runoff’s post, the term chillwave began appearing on larger music sites, including one who praised the year’s “summer of chillwave,”⁷¹ and by the following spring even mainstream outlets like The Wall Street Journal began publishing stories on the genre.

⁶⁹ David Keenan, “Childhood’s End,” *The Wire*, August 2009.

⁷⁰ Carles, “Is WASHED OUT the next Neon Indian/Memory Cassette?,” *Hipster Runoff* (blog), July 27, 2009, <https://web.archive.org/web/20130717013018/http://hipsterrunoff.com/node/1780>.

⁷¹ Mark Richardson, “In My Room (The Best Coast Song): Nine Fragments on Lo-Fi’s Attraction to the Natural World,” Pitchfork, November 13, 2009, <https://pitchfork.com/features/resonant-frequency/7732-resonant-frequency-65/>.

Early definitions of chillwave were less tied to academic or theoretical matters than those of hauntology and hypnagogic pop, so the genre largely circulated among publications without an accompanying intellectual framework. Instead, chillwave functioned primarily as stylistic shorthand in the popular press—a label indie outlets could use to attract audiences interested in emerging musical trends. Pitchfork, one of the most prominent sites in this rush to christen new genres, was created in 1995 and initially focused on independent rock groups. The outlet gathered a following thanks to their reviews' unrestrained prose that ranged from effusive to dismissive, even harsh, and by the 2000s, the site held enough sway to significantly boost the profiles of emerging artists like future Grammy winners Arcade Fire and Bon Iver. And in 2009, Pitchfork greeted the newest genre trend with open arms, even coining the aforementioned “summer of chillwave.”

Just as chillwave artists were only the latest in a string of musicians exploring nostalgia, music sites' embrace of the term epitomized the past decade's rush to coin and champion new genres. Throughout the 2000s, a bevy of newly-proposed labels like “blog house” and “freak folk” quickly appeared and vanished, each driven by sites eager for readership. Reflecting on the trend in 2009, one critic described how “entire genres of music are ‘discovered’ by attention-starved writers; bloggers engage in hilarious slap-fights about who was there first; magazines feel pressured into writing clueless, hackazoid, late-pass trend pieces...and the phenomenon is promptly abandoned once we find a newer, shinier toy to play with.”⁷² As the decade closed, writers and readers

⁷² Christopher R. Weingarten, “The Decade in Music Genre Hype,” *The Village Voice*, December 22, 2009, <https://www.villagevoice.com/2009/12/22/the-decade-in-music-genre-hype/>.

alike slowly became more cynical about the parade of new genres, and this cynicism collided with chillwave right at the style's commercial peak.

Before the flurry of publicity, chillwave artists had none of the geographical or interpersonal connections that traditionally defined a genre. Instead, as one musician noted, “now it’s just a blogger or some journalist that can find three or four random bands around the country and tie together a few commonalities between them and call it a genre.”⁷³ This seeming tenuousness—the impression that chillwave was more a journalistic fabrication than a genuine movement—led criticisms of the genre to mount through the following year. Critic Simon Reynolds, himself a key figure in conceptualizing hauntology, described 2010 as “the Year of Chillwave Backlash...obligatory reference to Hipstamatic + snigger at the name + invocation of nostalgia as a priori Bad Thing = entire region of music dismissed.”⁷⁴ Reynolds suggested that the mounting frustration with “fad” genres had spread beyond journalistic practices to musical qualities as well, leading to an increased skepticism of nostalgia as a viable creative concern. Possibly as a result of these twin pressures, the most popular chillwave artists began moving beyond the genre’s stylistic wheelhouse, and by February 2011, Pitchfork described chillwave as having possibly “run its course.”⁷⁵ Chillwave’s entire life in the public eye lasted less than two years, dogged by suspicions that it was little more than media hyperbole. And for the genre’s critics, if chillwave had any value, then it was as a cautionary tale for overzealous music sites.

⁷³ Garin Pirnia, “Is Chillwave the Next Big Music Trend?,” *The Wall Street Journal*, March 13, 2010, <https://web.archive.org/web/20100315162237/https://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2010/03/13/is-chillwave-the-next-big-music-trend/>.

⁷⁴ Simon Reynolds, “Leave Chillwave Alone,” *The Village Voice*, January 19, 2011, <https://www.villagevoice.com/2011/01/19/leave-chillwave-alone/>.

⁷⁵ Larry Fitzmaurice, “MillionYoung: Replicants Album Review,” *Pitchfork*, February 21, 2011, <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/15117-replicants/>.

“Witch house”—electronic dance music inspired by the occult—charted a similarly rapid trajectory during this period. In December 2009, Pitchfork published a collection of musicians’ thoughts on the preceding year, where producer Pictureplane proclaimed that he and fellow musician Shams had created witch house, which was bound to flourish the following year.⁷⁶ The Michigan-based band Salem seemed poised to fulfill this prediction with the success of their debut album *King Night*, which appeared on multiple publications’ lists of the best releases of 2010. However, Salem proved an outlier. A cohesive witch house style never fully formed, and in December 2010 Pictureplane admitted that he and Shams coined the label in jest. “It was never meant to be an actual genre, at least not fully. It was a half-assed conceptual joke that really turned into something real.”⁷⁷ By the start of 2011, witch house had quickly become another symbol of journalistic overreach among audiences, ensuring the genre’s demise. As a critic observed in hindsight, “no one seemed to really know what witch house was actually supposed to sound like, but everyone knew they didn’t want to be part of it.”⁷⁸

Twice stung by the rapid decline of chillwave and witch house, Pitchfork and other sites began treating Internet music genres with more suspicion. A more skeptical readership likely tempered editorial interest in basing new genres on the work of only a few artists, and the prevalence of ironic gestures in the indie subculture raised the

⁷⁶ Travis Egedy, “Guest List: Best of 2009,” Pitchfork, December 11, 2009, <https://pitchfork.com/features/guest-lists/7740-guest-list-best-of-2009/?page=4>.

⁷⁷ Travis Egedy, This Is Witch House, interview by Tuyet Nguyen, The AV Club, December 30, 2010, <https://web.archive.org/web/20110101070906/http://www.avclub.com/denver/articles/this-is-witch-house,49199/>.

⁷⁸ Sam Hockley-Smith, “The Short Life, Weird Death, and Mild Rebirth of the Witch House Genre,” Grantland, June 9, 2015, <https://grantland.com/hollywood-prospectus/the-short-life-weird-death-and-mild-rebirth-of-the-witch-house-genre/>.

possibility of another joke in the vein of witch house. As one writer noted, “it’s now hard to take online micro-trends...seriously because of the infamous legacy of chillwave. How can we ever fully trust again?”⁷⁹ Rather than risk the possibility of damaging their credibility with more hyperbole, many outlets deemed it safer to refrain from niche labels and predictions. So, when a few journalists began writing about vaporwave in 2012, the nascent genre seemed only the latest example of a familiar pattern.

These suspicions laced much of vaporwave’s negative press coverage, particularly from Pitchfork’s competitors. Vice Media, another company popular with indie audiences, later published a few articles critical of vaporwave, including one that praised the producer Saint Pepsi while simultaneously dismissing the genre as a farce.

According to some people Saint Pepsi makes music that could be classed as “vaporwave,” which is easily the worst genre tag we’ve heard since witch house. We imagine the proponents of “vaporwave” to be insufferably smug with very few social skills to speak of, so we’re not even going to dignify vaporwave with an explanation, nor claim Saint Pepsi is part of it.⁸⁰

This invocation of witch house suggests a determination to avoid being duped by another prank or journalistic fabrication, while another Vice article listed vaporwave among “Nine Subgenres You Probably Don’t Know About (and Maybe That’s OK).” Writing in 2014, the author described these subgenres as ridiculous and irrelevant, due to be written out of history despite vaporwave having “kept some momentum in spite of itself.”⁸¹ Vice, these articles suggested, had learned the same cautionary lesson as Pitchfork; they were just especially vocal about it.

⁷⁹ Dave Schilling, “That Was a Thing: The Brief History of the Totally Made-Up Chillwave Music Genre,” Grantland, April 8, 2015, <http://grantland.com/hollywood-prospectus/that-was-a-thing-the-brief-history-of-the-totally-made-up-chillwave-music-genre/>.

⁸⁰ Kim Taylor Bennett, “Here’s Saint Pepsi’s Remix of Erik Hassle’s ‘Talk About It,’” Noisey, November 25, 2013, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/69zvdr/heres-saint-pepsis-remix-of-erik-hassles-talk-about-it.

⁸¹ Max Pearl, “Nine Subgenres You Probably Don’t Know About (and Maybe That’s OK),” Noisey, April 24, 2014, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/aeq5ek/9-microgenres-you-probably-dont-know-about.

Other publications also placed vaporwave in this lineage of short-lived genre fads: brief cycles of hype and backlash where “some new microgenre was over the second it got a name, if it ever really existed to begin with.”⁸² Pitchfork was particularly reluctant to appear excited about subsequent neologisms, rarely if ever discussing vaporwave during the genre’s early years. One rare mention came in a joking quiz that challenged readers to distinguish “real” genres like vaporwave from fictional counterparts. More important than their editorial caution, though, Pitchfork included a rare definition of genre in this piece: “a descriptor of similar musical productions/artists which is repeated in legitimate publications with full-time editors over some period of time.”⁸³ This definition parallels David Brackett’s, emphasizing the constitutive power of genre citations in the music press. And though many outlets like Pitchfork were wary of covering vaporwave, others were plenty happy to discuss what this new genre encompassed and where its style came from.

An Online Avant-Garde

Vaporwave emerged in part from user-created metadata on streaming site Last.fm. These tags no longer exist online, but early press coverage indicates that the label “vaporwave” proliferated on the site and was “familiar to many of those who make [the music].”⁸⁴ Rather than journalists originating the term, vaporwave came from listeners, who likely used the tag as one among many to describe obscure albums they

⁸² Patrick D. McDermott and Emilie Friedlander, “A Recent History of Microgenres,” *The Fader*, October 8, 2015, <https://www.thefader.com/2015/10/08/timeline-history-of-music-microgenres-chillwave-cloud-rap-witch-house>.

⁸³ Jonny Coleman, “Quiz: Is This a Real Genre,” *Pitchfork*, May 1, 2015, <https://pitchfork.com/thepitch/756-quiz-is-this-a-real-genre/>.

⁸⁴ Adam Harper, “Comment: Vaporwave and the Pop-Art of the Virtual Plaza,” *Dummy*, July 12, 2012, <https://www.dummymag.com/news/adam-harper-vaporwave/>.

discovered on streaming platforms. And unlike past microgenres, vaporwave also stemmed from a small social group of musicians who connected through online platforms. More than its predecessors, vaporwave constituted a genre in Lena's Avant-garde stage: small, close-knit, and lacking any overarching definition.⁸⁵ Definition came from niche press outlets, with critic Adam Harper and music site Tiny Mix Tapes providing the earliest identifications of the genre's style, visuals, and thematic content. These genre citations parallel Lena's description of Scene-based media coverage, where writers "define, explain, promote, and critique the music."⁸⁶ Vaporwave's shift from the Avant-garde to the Scene-based stage occurred within a few months, as press attention brought the genre wider recognition from those unfamiliar with its metadata or social circle. Just as quickly, though, prominent musicians began working in other styles and new releases merely imitated popular albums. Journalists and listeners feared that the skeptics were correct: vaporwave was doomed to a quick demise.

Blogs and Last.fm are both ephemeral sources. Sites and accounts are easily and frequently deleted, which makes it difficult to locate many of the first invocations of vaporwave other than the aforementioned blog Weed Temple. This historical gap makes early press coverage of the genre even more vital, with outlets identifying and analyzing vaporwave's foundational characteristics. In a seminal July article announcing the genre's arrival, critic Adam Harper described the "typical vaporwave track" as:

a wholly synthesised or heavily processed chunk of corporate mood music, bright and earnest or slow and sultry, often beautiful, either looped out of sync and beyond the point of functionality or standing alone, and sometimes with a smattering of miasma about it. It's made by mysterious and often nameless entities that lurk the internet, often behind a pseudo-corporate name or web

⁸⁵ Lena, *Banding Together*, 31.

⁸⁶ Lena, 37.

façade, and whose music is typically free to download through Mediafire, Last FM, Soundcloud or Bandcamp.⁸⁷

Harper became vaporwave's most visible champion, publishing pieces that would be referenced and debated countless times by the genre's community of listeners. Early vaporwave coverage served more than a documentary function, though; such articles were an example of David Brackett's aforementioned concept of citationality, creating a genre through invocation.⁸⁸ Even more than his sonic definitions, Harper's influence on vaporwave history is most evident in his political argument, which serves as a point of community contention to this day.

Harper asserted that vaporwave frequently critiqued capitalism as an alienating ideology, one that offers illusory promises of personal fulfillment through consumption. Prominent in Harper's argument was Robin Burnett, better known as INTERNET CLUB, who explicitly connected their interest in corporate background music with a Leftist perspective. Referencing French theorist Guy Debord, Burnett hoped that their work "[showed] how this capitalistic society has generated a dehumanizing hyperreality by focusing on infinite generation of ideals as shown through commodities."⁸⁹ In *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord made a similar argument, positing that consumer culture had reduced authentic human experience to an alienated system of images and representations.⁹⁰ Though vaporwave's political content is not central to my analysis, Harper prioritized such concerns. As this article became a frequent referent for the

⁸⁷ Harper, "Comment: Vaporwave."

⁸⁸ Brackett, *Categorizing Sound*, 13.

⁸⁹ Harper, "Comment: Vaporwave."

⁹⁰ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 1st paperback (New York: Zone Books, 1994).

vaporwave community, vaporwave's capacity for Leftist political critique became a popular, though contested, method of understanding the genre.

Harper also acknowledged the feasibility of other interpretations. Listeners could hear producers as “sarcastic anti-capitalists revealing the lies and slippages of modern techno-culture and its representations, or as its willing facilitators, shivering with delight upon each new wave of delicious sound.”⁹¹ After all, much of vaporwave's source material was created to be as unobtrusive as possible, with common textures like smooth saxophones and airy synth pads. Vaporwave could just as readily function as an embrace of aural pleasure, albeit one complicated by a producer's knowingly obtrusive edits. To that end, producer Ramona Xavier cited less political motivations. Though she too sampled music with little cultural cachet—smooth jazz, adult contemporary, elevator music—Xavier strove instead for an emotional connection. “What I hope people draw from my work is that it is sincere.”⁹² Vaporwave could be both ironic or genuine.

Alongside Burnett, Xavier typified early vaporwave with her work under a variety of aliases like 情報デスクVIRTUAL (“Virtual Information Desk”), all gathered under the purview of a fictional enterprise named New Dreams Ltd. Like Burnett, Xavier made frequent use of reverb effects and abrupt cuts within a sample, recasting the familiar timbres of background music as an occasionally jarring presence. On the track “Data Dream” from her album *New Dreams Ltd.*, Xavier samples composer Jonn Serrie, whose “New Age” music has appeared in many U.S. planetariums since the 1980s.⁹³

⁹¹ Harper, “Comment: Vaporwave.”

⁹² Harper.

⁹³ Laserdisc Visions, *New Dreams Ltd.*, Digital, 2011, <https://vektroid.bandcamp.com/album/new-dreams-ltd>.

Serrie's song "Tingri" features a synthesized pan flute atop airy pads and twinkling keys, creating a tranquil atmosphere that Xavier undermines with her alterations.⁹⁴ Not only is "Tingri" slowed and pitched-down for the bulk of "Data Dream," but Xavier's cuts become more obtrusive after 1:40, when one-second sections of the track begin looping, reminiscent of a vinyl record stuck in a groove. Then at 2:05, the same brief loop starts repeating at a variety of speeds and pitches in quick succession, further transforming the soothing source material into something far harsher.

Bennett and Xavier loom large in Harper's account of vaporwave, though he briefly acknowledged other producers as well. Key among them was the anonymous 骨架的, commonly translated as "Skeleton," whose 2010 albums *Skeleton* and *Holograms* predated more widely celebrated releases by Burnett and Xavier.⁹⁵ The latter readily championed 骨架的's work, praising it as "by far the single most important piece of 'vaporwave' there is. it inspired everything, new dreams ltd and internet club included."⁹⁶ In her conversation with Harper, Xavier also cited the influence of producer Daniel Lopatin, whose early work as Oneohtrix Point Never featured prominently in David Kennan's previously-cited analysis of hypnagogic pop. Lopatin's 2010 album *Chuck Person's EccoJams Vol. 1* featured slowed-down and looped samples of 1980s pop hits like Toto's "Africa," serving as a model for the aesthetic choices of producers like Burnett and Xavier.⁹⁷ Even the album's visuals proved significant. Named in part after the 1992 Sega video game *Ecco the Dolphin*, *EccoJams'* cover edits together pieces of

⁹⁴ Jonn Serrie, *Tingri*, CD, 1990.

⁹⁵ 骷, *Skeleton*, Digital, 2010, <https://soundcpu.bandcamp.com/album/skeleton>; 骷, *Holograms*, Digital, 2010, <https://soundcpu.bandcamp.com/album/holograms>.

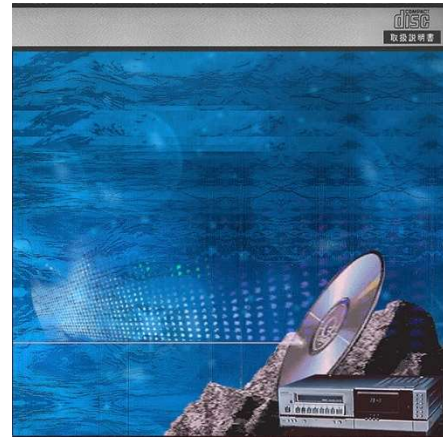
⁹⁶ Ramona Xavier, "No.30213224," *4chan*, November 16, 2012, <http://rft.asia/mu/thread/S30209918>.

⁹⁷ Chuck Person, *Chuck Person's EccoJams Vol. 1*, Cassette, 2010.

the game's own box art into a haphazard collage. Similarly, the art for Xavier's album *New Dreams Ltd.* combines the logo of a Sega Saturn game console with low-polygon computer models and an early CD player, even using a similar shade of ocean-blue for the backdrop.



Chuck Person's EccoJams Volume 1, 2010.



New Dreams Ltd., 2011.

In her correspondence with Harper, Ramona Xavier noted that she and her online social group originally called their tracks “eccoJams” in homage to Lopatin, who himself used the term to describe “a really simple kind of practice that anybody can do if you have like really basic recording capabilities of grabbing a phrase from a track, slowing it down, and putting a load of echo on it.”⁹⁸ And in 2013, Lopatin responded to a listener’s question about *EccoJams*’ influence on vaporwave by noting that, while unfamiliar with the genre beyond occasional communication with Xavier, he “always hoped [eccoJams] would be something people would just do -- its [sic] kinda folky by nature.”⁹⁹ Unlike much of previous electronic music, which required expensive software

⁹⁸ Motherboard, *Electric Independence: Daniel Lopatin (Oneohtrix Point Never) - Motherboard*, Online, Electric Independence, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E0RAmNU5Es8>.

⁹⁹ Daniel Lopatin, “I’m Daniel Lopatin, Pka Oneohtrix Point Never. AMA.,” Reddit, October 8, 2013, https://www.reddit.com/r/Music/comments/1nzjqm/im_daniel_lopatin_pka_oneohtrix_point_never_ama/.

and a degree of technological expertise, vaporwave drastically lowered the barrier to entry for audio production. All an aspiring artist needed were pre-existing audio files and a rudimentary understanding of free editing programs like Audacity, both of which were far more accessible than professional-grade programs like Pro Tools. This do-it-yourself ethos would prove instrumental to vaporwave's continued popularity, allowing even teenagers (like Burnett) to begin producing and releasing music.

Lopatin's influence also served an intermediary purpose, bridging vaporwave and the 1990s work of Houston hip-hop producer DJ Screw. Screw worked on countless mixtapes during that decade, enjoying regional acclaim for his signature "chopped and screwed" production style, which slowed and pitched-down backing samples and lead raps alike. The result was a lethargic, hazy set of sonic qualities that proved influential on subsequent producers—including Lopatin—after Screw's untimely death in 2000. Xavier herself credited Screw in her interview with Adam Harper, acknowledging that "screw music has been around for ages now – we've just changed the context we see it within and the means by which we conceive it."¹⁰⁰ Screw's innovations inspired Xavier and Burnett to turn commercial background music uncanny, transforming chipper or tranquil ambience into an unsettling morass.

While many of vaporwave's production techniques stemmed from Screw and Lopatin, the genre's concern with international business, advertising, and consumer electronics came in part from James Ferraro, another producer of hypnagogic pop. Ferraro's early, low-fidelity music featured prominently in David Keenan's article coining the genre, but in 2011 he abruptly shifted from analog to digital sonics, centering his

¹⁰⁰ Harper.

album *Far Side Virtual* around MIDI presets.¹⁰¹ The track “Dubai Dream Tone” features artificial strings reminiscent of corporate training seminars, while “Global Lunch” includes a synthesized voice asking “sir, would you like to receive the *New Yorker* directly on your iPad?” From its jet-setting track titles to its artwork superimposing two Apple iPads atop a bustling downtown street, *Far Side Virtual* embraces the aesthetics of online commerce in a manner similar to Burnett and Xavier’s contemporary releases.



Far Side Virtual, 2011.

These aesthetics quickly became foundational to vaporwave’s subsequent development, even if Ferraro considered himself outside the genre. Reflecting on his influence, Ferraro later noted that “since day one, [vaporwave has] been someone else’s interpretation of my work...it’s always been this thing that’s cool, but I don’t really know what it is.” Despite professing ignorance, however, he offered an astute definition of the genre: a combination of *Far Side Virtual*’s conceptual framework and *Eccojams*’ production style.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ James Ferraro, *Far Side Virtual*, Digital, 2011.

¹⁰² Anna Gaca, “A Conversation With James Ferraro, Critical Futurist,” Spin, August 18, 2016, <https://www.spin.com/2016/08/james-ferraro-human-story-3-interview/>.

While Adam Harper connected this combination with anti-capitalist politics, independent-music site Tiny Mix Tapes used the overlap to reflect on Internet personae. Alongside Harper, TMT most visibly shaped early vaporwave discourse, with its first mention of the genre even predating Harper's by nine days. In July 2012, the site named Xavier's *Floral Shoppe* as one of their "Favorite 30 Albums of 2012 (So Far)," describing vaporwave producers "a new breed of mysterious pop appropriators...taking 'screw' methods several steps beyond, into hypnotic virtual realms populated by liquid crystal simulacra operating as archetypes of an emerging internet unconscious."¹⁰³ Like Harper, TMT described vaporwave in terms indebted to postmodern theory, but they suggested that some (nebulous) aspect of listeners' and producers' humanity was being altered by the Internet. The site praised Xavier along similar lines when they named *Floral Shoppe* one of the best albums of the year: "the sound of a kind of sensuous virtuality, the artist as simulacra, both the experience *and* problematization of the post-human, a new cyber-pop unconscious."¹⁰⁴ Again, while the site offers few details on the nature of this new unconscious, it cast vaporwave as the harbinger of a new form of humanity, one resulting from Internet anonymity.

Much of this "post-human" rhetoric centered on the uncanny qualities of vaporwave's vocal samples, with *Floral Shoppe*'s second track "リサフランク420 / 現代のコンピュー" ("Lisa Frank 420 / Modern Computing") an oft-cited example.¹⁰⁵ Xavier repurposes Diana Ross's 1984 new wave song "It's Your Move," turning a perky tune

¹⁰³ Jonathan Dean, "Favorite 30 Albums of 2012 (So Far)," Tiny Mix Tapes, July 3, 2012, <https://www.tinymixtapes.com/features/favorite-30-albums-of-2012-so-far-staff-feature>.

¹⁰⁴ James Parker, "2012: Favorite 50 Albums of 2012," Tiny Mix Tapes, December 17, 2012, <https://www.tinymixtapes.com/features/2012-favorite-50-albums-of-2012?page=4>.

¹⁰⁵ Macintosh Plus, *Floral Shoppe*, Digital, 2011, <https://vektroid.bandcamp.com/album/floral-shoppe>.

into a languid swirl and, as contemporary critics were fond of pointing out, shifting Ross's voice into a more masculine timbre. In their first mention of vaporwave, Tiny Mix Tapes heralded this vocal androgyny as a key component of the genre's "post-human" qualities, and their early praise of "リサフランク420" laid the groundwork for that song (and its parent album) to become vaporwave's most popular, most influential release.

However, Tiny Mix Tapes' broad claims assumed vaporwave's status as a distinct, coherent genre—an assumption other staff were quick to question. When site editor Marvin Lin reviewed Xavier's album *札幌コンテンポラリー* ("Contemporary Sapporo"), he cautioned against the totalizing effect of genre categories, noting that even so-called "vaporwave" musicians sampled maligned music to a wide variety of ends. As opposed to her extensive edits on *Floral Shoppe*, Xavier seemed to leave much of her source material untouched on *札幌コンテンポラリー*, directing the listener's attention away from her production choices and towards the album's aggressive indifference to taste. Forced to pay close attention to the sort of mood music critics usually ignored (if not derided), Lin described the result as "emotionally complex...[playing with] perception, taste, time, degradation, hierarchy, the instability of identity, the impermanence of technology, the prejudices of memory, the fine line between production and reproduction, the cultural constructions that need a screw or exaggeration to be exposed as such."¹⁰⁶ This list underpinned Lin's wariness of genre labels, which he feared could gloss over conceptual richness. In discussing his fears,

¹⁰⁶ Mr. P, "情報デスクVIRTUAL - 札幌コンテンポラリー," Tiny Mix Tapes, August 6, 2012, <https://www.tinymixtapes.com/music-review/virtual-information-desk-contemporary-sapporo>.

Lin even implicitly responded to Adam Harper, insisting that political interpretations only addressed a portion of what made vaporwave important.

Finally, another Tiny Mix Tapes writer suggested that not only was vaporwave an unstable category, but that *any* conceptual definition of it was incomplete. In his review of Robin Burnett's album *VANISHING VISION*, James Parker characterized vaporwave as more method than genre, arguing for a "digi-materialism" that investigated the musical practices and technological conditions that made vaporwave possible.¹⁰⁷ These ranged from the omnipresence of free audio-editing software like Audacity to the lax online enforcement of copyright for recordings of Muzak and similar tracks. And if these conditions contributed to the rise of vaporwave, conceptual readings of the music might be responding to those conditions as much as any authorial intent on the part of the artist.

Harper, Lin, and Parker offered divergent interpretations of vaporwave within a three-month period, differing in their emphases on the prospective genre's political, conceptual, and material dimensions. All three perspectives would recur in community discussions over the coming years, indicating (as with hauntology and hypnagogic pop in year past) these critics' early importance in shaping vaporwave. However, only Parker had the benefit of writing during a time when the genre's very existence seemed doomed; a few weeks prior, Ramona Xavier—the most popular vaporwave producer—announced the conclusion of her work under New Dreams Ltd.¹⁰⁸ Xavier's retirement led Parker to conclude his review with misgivings about vaporwave's longevity, and only

¹⁰⁷ James Parker, "INTERNET CLUB - VANISHING VISION," Tiny Mix Tapes, September 20, 2012, <https://www.tinymixtapes.com/music-review/internet-club-vanishing-vision>.

¹⁰⁸ Mr. P, "Sacred Tapestry - Shader [Album Stream]," Tiny Mix Tapes, August 31, 2012, <https://www.tinymixtapes.com/chocolate-grinder/listen-sacred-tapestry-emshaderem-album-stream>.

a few days after his writing, Robin Burnett added to that sentiment by announcing the suspension of INTERNET CLUB.¹⁰⁹ Given the retirement of vaporwave's two largest exponents and Burnett's embrace of drone music under the moniker Datavis, Parker's skepticism seemed particularly prescient.

Come October, Parker was confident enough to make even bolder predictions, making his review of Datavis's split album *Prism Projector* an obituary for vaporwave. Parker again argued that vaporwave was better characterized as one brief incarnation of a methodological gesture rather than a genre; experimental Internet musicians would continue to vary their styles and creative processes, and the term "vaporwave" would have been important but ultimately short-lived. "Vaporwave will have yielded hardly any physical releases and will barely *ever* have been heard 'live.' Apart from a bunch of MP3s...vaporwave will have left very little mark on the world. Not just that. In 10 years' time, virtually no one will still listen to it."¹¹⁰ Others followed Parker's lead, including a producer named Chaz Allen (also known as Metallic Ghosts). Despite him and anonymous producer Stress co-creating SPF420, a set of livestreamed music performances that helped grow vaporwave's niche audience, Allen was so pessimistic about the genre's future that he described the second incarnation of SPF420 as its "final eulogy." According to Allen, vaporwave's style was too narrowly-defined to be sustainable, and press attention made producers already wary of being typecast even quicker to move on. "As soon as you name something...it's going to take off and die."¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Jonathan Dean, "INTERNET CLUB - FINAL TEARS [Album Stream]," Tiny Mix Tapes, September 24, 2012, <https://www.tinymixtapes.com/chocolate-grinder/listen-internet-club-final-tears-album-stream>.

¹¹⁰ James Parker, "Datavis + Forgotten Light - Prism Projector," Tiny Mix Tapes, October 11, 2012, <https://www.tinymixtapes.com/music-review/datavis-forgotten-light-prism-projector>.

¹¹¹ Leor Galil, "Vaporwave and the Observer Effect," Chicago Reader, February 19, 2013, <https://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/vaporwave-spf420-chaz-allen-metallic-ghosts-prismcorp-veracom/Content?oid=8831558>.

By the end of 2012, vaporwave seemed doomed. Its two most popular producers had retired or switched to other styles, journalists and musicians speculated that it was both dead and maybe never even a genre in the first place, and its life fit neatly into past narratives of jokes and journalistic overreach like chillwave and witch house. The latter's origin as a prank was especially telling, given Ramona Xavier's description of New Dreams Ltd. as "a slightly derisive practical joke aimed at the witch house/seapunk/net music scene...bred from the hypothesis that the scene has such a backwards mentality of music that they will listen to anything, no matter how tragically unfashionable the music sounds, if it's packaged fashionably."¹¹² And as before, journalists unwittingly played into Xavier's prank, crafting thoughtful analyses worlds away from the producer's intentions. That dissonance between puckish form and academic reception likely fueled press dismissals of vaporwave and its producers, with many outlets convinced that the entire genre was another ruse not worth their time. Similarly, while Xavier appreciated the thought and attention given her work by Adam Harper and Tiny Mix Tapes, she worried that such coverage "encourages people to over-intellectualize it, which in turn makes the people behind it appear unjustifiably pretentious...given the type of music we specialize in. how much context can you really give to a doctored loop of a jazz instrumental...you can view it as forward thinking, or just as easily, taking the piss."¹¹³

Given that choice, some listeners chose both. Xavier posted her thoughts to the popular Internet message board 4chan, a site known for its central place in online meme culture and its irreverent, often abusive tenor. Users of "/mu/," 4chan's music forum, regularly praised vaporwave while simultaneously ridiculing the genre,

¹¹² Ramona Xavier, "No.30216464," *4chan*, November 16, 2012, <https://rbt.asia/mu/thread/S30209918>.

¹¹³ Ramona Xavier, "No.30216453," *4chan*, November 16, 2012, <https://rbt.asia/mu/thread/S30209918>.

embodying the site's characteristic combination of sincerity and irony. "We're all ironic hipsters here, self-derisive humour is our perpetual defense mechanism."¹¹⁴ That defense mechanism belied an audience attachment to vaporwave far deeper than any critic could have predicted, but Xavier proved more prescient, given her membership in the same community that championed her work. Speculating on the genre's future in far more measured tones than those of press obituaries, she acknowledged that the matter was out of her hands. "Perhaps vaporwave's legacy really will be decided by its audience. it's hard to imagine what 2013 will be like."¹¹⁵

From Ashes

Though vaporwave was supposedly over by the end of 2012, audiences never stopped discussing the genre. Listeners on the web forum 4chan constantly mentioned vaporwave, asking if the genre was dead, proclaiming the genre dead, and sometimes gushing over their recent discovery of the genre. All these citations circulated vaporwave as a concept, and on streaming platforms artists did the same in their metadata. Inspired by the genre's earliest producers, a new wave of musicians began tagging their albums as vaporwave despite many stylistic differences. These new artists incorporated elements of R&B, hip-hop, and dance music, dramatically widening vaporwave's sonic palette. Stylistic experimentation triggered intense debates among listeners. Those with a focused definition of vaporwave derided new styles as "broporwave"—music for shallow, tasteless "bros"—while more catholic listeners

¹¹⁴ Resident, "No.27893856," *4chan*, September 1, 2012, <https://desuarchive.org/mu/thread/27892912/#q27893856>.

¹¹⁵ Xavier, "No.30216453."

celebrated them as fresh air for a stagnant genre. As with discussions of genre death, metadata citations of vaporwave and the ensuing community tension further sustained the genre. In less than a year a supposedly passé fad had become a vibrant scene.

Despite their enthusiasm for the genre, much of /mu/ was as pessimistic as everybody else about vaporwave's future by late 2012. Proclamations of death first appeared on the forum in July, but the sentiment grew far more widespread after the "retirements" of New Dreams Ltd. and INTERNET CLUB. Listeners weren't solely responding to the loss of genre figureheads, though; like Chaz Allen, many cited vaporwave's narrow stylistic parameters as an equally damning force. Given the genre's prevailing emphasis on "screwing" old samples of background music, "the source materials are what restrict and confine (and thereby defining) vaporwave as a particular work."¹¹⁶ These perceived restrictions may have contributed to a lack of new releases, which posters invoked as further evidence of vaporwave's demise. "There are few original works still being made under this name/aesthetic. Almost as soon as it came alive it had already began [sic] its decay."¹¹⁷ This sentiment that vaporwave was "dead on arrival" echoed Allen's concerns of overexposure, but such concerns were hardly unanimous.

What's more, though vaporwave was purportedly dead, 4chan users continued to *discuss* the genre, keeping it alive through repeated citation. Some suggested that the persistence of these conversations spoke to vaporwave's tenacity: "vaporwave is

¹¹⁶ Anonymous, "No.30273271," *4chan*, November 18, 2012, <https://archive.rebeccablacktech.com/mu/thread/30271503/#q30273271>.

¹¹⁷ Anonymous, "No.30586154," *4chan*, November 28, 2012, <https://archive.rebeccablacktech.com/mu/thread/30585869/#q30586154>.

already dead yet we continue to return to it.”¹¹⁸ And listeners weren’t the only people returning to vaporwave either. Chaz Allen co-organized the third SPF420 a mere month after describing its predecessor as vaporwave’s “eulogy,” complete with Ramona Xavier headlining under her Vektroid alias. However, the third SPF420 cast a wider stylistic net than previous incarnations, suggesting that both the festival and vaporwave itself were rapidly diversifying. Where traditional vaporwave centered on the “screwing” of sampled background music, lowering the tempo and interrupting a sample’s rhythms, many artists on the billing made overtly beat-oriented music.

Producers Blackedout and Magic Fades drew heavily from R&B, with the former basing their song “You Don’t Understand” off a sample of a 1960s Motown track and the latter providing original vocals and lyrics (a rarity for vaporwave) about a romantic entanglement on “She Beat All the Haters.”¹¹⁹ Both of these tracks prominently featured the Roland TR-808 drum machine, using patterns similar to those found in the music of contemporary R&B stars like Usher and Trey Songz. The producer Contact Lens, meanwhile, made DJ Screw’s influence on vaporwave even more overt with songs like “I WANNA DIE PT. I,” delivering a pitched-down rap over a sample of a 1990s R&B hit.¹²⁰ Finally, DJ Paypal made outright *dance* music, drawing from the uptempo styles of juke and drum n’ bass on their EP *Why*.¹²¹ All of these artists broke from prevailing press definitions of vaporwave, and though these departures might seem to have little in

¹¹⁸ Anonymous, “No.33558888,” *4chan*, February 28, 2013, <https://archive.rebeccablacktech.com/mu/thread/33557901/#q33558888>.

¹¹⁹ Blackedout, *Blackedout*, Digital, 2013, <https://blackedout.bandcamp.com/album/blackedout-ep>; Magic Fades, *She Beat All the Haters*, Digital, 2012, <https://magicfades.bandcamp.com/album/she-beat-all-the-haters>.

¹²⁰ Contact Lens, *ICE IN THA VEINS*, Digital, 2012, <https://contactlensarchive.bandcamp.com/album/ice-in-tha-veins>.

¹²¹ DJ Paypal, *Why*, Digital, 2012, <https://djpaypal.bandcamp.com/album/why>.

common, Tiny Mix Tapes editor Marvin Lin heard a through-line. “Lust for the groove, masterful repetition, hyperreal imagery, sensual exaggerations, fluid aesthetics”—gathered under the banner of an event typically associated with vaporwave, these characteristics suggested new and emerging directions for the genre.¹²² And judging by the festival’s attendance peaking at 325 people, as well as a subsequent May event organized in collaboration with vaporwave label Fortune 500, audiences wanted to hear more.¹²³

By the end of May, Tiny Mix Tapes staff acknowledged that vaporwave obituaries were premature. Challenging James Parker’s article published the previous year, pseudonymous contributor “Trurl” wrote a glowing review of producer Nmesh’s album *Nu.wav Hallucinations*, describing the artist as one example among many of vaporwave’s rapidly expanding stylistic possibilities. Nmesh combined familiar source material with a greater emphasis on American media and frequent drug references, repositioning the genre’s disorienting sonics within a history of U.S. psychedelia. For example, “ΞΛT THE ΞGGS ☹☹☹” manipulates a goofy line of dialogue from a 1986 Disney TV film into a lurching, unsettling vocal loop, while “This Is Drugs” simply “screws” the titular narration from the famous 1987 U.S. public-service announcement “This Is Your Brain on Drugs.” Trurl concluded their review by taking stock of vaporwave’s recent history:

¹²² Mr. P, “Internet Fest #SPF420 to Feature Vektroid (Macintosh Plus), DJ PayPal, Contact Lens, Magic Fades, and More; Starts Tomorrow!,” Tiny Mix Tapes, March 19, 2013, <https://www.tinymixtapes.com/news/internet-fest-spf420-to-feature-vektroid-macintosh-plus-dj-paypal-contact-lens-magic-fades-and>.

¹²³ Ryan Simpson, “By the Powers of SPF420 and Fortune500 Combined, There Is the Fortune 420 Vaporwave Concert, Just a Button-Click Away,” Tiny Mix Tapes, April 24, 2013, <https://www.tinymixtapes.com/news/spf420-and-label-fortune-500-team-for-vaporwave-event-called-fortune-420>.

So is vaporwave really dead? I don't know. If I were to base its life on Last.fm or Bandcamp tags, then my answer would be a definitive no. And when I search the bowels of the internet, I can still find pockets holding free zip files full of MP3 goodness that certainly resemble something like the early vaporwave that was available last summer...But it seems that now the definition [of a vaporwave record] is more multifarious than ever...There isn't an easy answer, and perhaps the things that vaporwave has promised and never delivered on have been twofold: its own demise, and an understanding of itself.¹²⁴

Both of these promises would become lifelong mainstays of vaporwave discourse, but while journalists in 2013 were happy to accept that vaporwave had escaped death, efforts to reach “an understanding” of the genre proved as irresistible as ever.

Revisiting vaporwave in July, Adam Harper also dismissed proclamations of its death and acknowledged how the genre had developed well beyond the scope of his initial account. While he maintained that anti-capitalist critique was still common within vaporwave, Harper admitted that he had overstated the degree to which vaporwave was necessarily sarcastic and emotionless. “Who was I to imply that the work of these bold new producers wasn't sincere?” Instead, Harper suggested that vaporwave was a utopian project, though as with Tiny Mix Tapes' prior invocation of a “new cyber-pop unconscious,” he offered few details on this utopia. Harper focused more on the new crop of vaporwave producers, whose work he frequently found “a sort of lazy insta-chillwave, grabbing the nearest chunk of late 80s or early 90s synth-funk pop songs and slowing it down, sometimes without even looping it, as if vaporwave had made it OK to put no thought and effort into making music at all.”¹²⁵ Harper linked creative decline with this indifference to genre distinctions, and though he admitted that such hair-splitting

¹²⁴ Trurl, “Nmesh - Nu.wav Hallucinations,” Tiny Mix Tapes, May 28, 2013, <https://www.tinymixtapes.com/music-review/nmesh-nuwav-hallucinations>.

¹²⁵ Adam Harper, “Essay: Invest in Vaporwave Futures!,” Dummy, July 29, 2013, <https://www.dummymag.com/features/essay-invest-in-vaporwave-futures/>.

was slightly ridiculous, he insisted that taking underground music seriously required attention to the shades of difference articulated by genre categories.

A few days later, Harper clarified the important distinctions between chillwave, hypnagogic pop, and vaporwave. Where chillwave was more pop-oriented and resonated with prevailing hipster stereotypes of the late 2000s, hypnagogic pop was more experimental in form and more exaggerated in its embrace of lo-fi production qualities. In 2012, Harper first saw vaporwave as a hi-fi, sample-based counterpart to hypnagogic pop, with Ramona Xavier's album *New Dreams Ltd.* serving as the new genre's point of departure. The following year, though, Harper concluded that the vaporwave community hewed much closer to the characteristics of hypnagogic pop, with Xavier's album *Floral Shoppe* exerting the most influence on vaporwave's development.¹²⁶ Where *New Dreams Ltd.* largely sampled background and New Age music, *Floral Shoppe* prioritized pop songs—a difference in source material whose influence informed Harper's critique of recent vaporwave as “insta-chillwave.”

Among this new crop of producers expanding vaporwave's array of sample sources, the most popular was Ryan DeRobertis. Better known as Saint Pepsi, DeRobertis sampled uptempo dance tracks of the 1970s and 1980s instead of languid elevator music, even naming one album *Studio 54* in homage to that era's famous New York City disco. And like many of the artists on the third SPF420 lineup, DeRobertis emphasized rhythmic continuity over interruption. On the track “CHALLENGER,” DeRobertis loops a 1980s R&B track, timing his edits in sync with the sampled

¹²⁶ Adam Harper, “Some Chillwave Differences,” *Rouge's Foam* (blog), August 4, 2013, <http://rougesfoam.blogspot.com/2013/08/some-chillwave-differences.html>.

groove.¹²⁷ While his use of sweeping EQ filters and pitch-shifted vocals gestured at traditional vaporwave, DeRobertis's fluid style was far closer to that of a dance DJ than the irregular patterns used by Robin Burnett. And like Nmesh and his album *Nu.wav Hallucinations*, DeRobertis included vaporwave among his Bandcamp tags, indicating just how rapidly the genre was diversifying.

Like many vaporwave producers, DeRobertis worked quickly, releasing seven albums and a slew of singles in under half a year. Two months after his first album he was already receiving praise from Tiny Mix Tapes,¹²⁸ and in June 2013 the site published their first full-length review of a Saint Pepsi album, *Hit Vibes*. The publication hailed the album while summarizing DeRobertis and similar artists' departure from familiar vaporwave aesthetics: "despite the fact that our SAINT PEPSI faction are employing the same chopped-and-screwed techniques as artists working with vaporwave, the former bunch tend to avoid sampling muzak, per se, while favoring R&B, soul, and pop music as their primary source material."¹²⁹ Again, this difference in source material echoes Adam Harper's identification of *Floral Shoppe*—not *New Dreams Ltd.*—as the album most influential on vaporwave's subsequent development. And DeRobertis's choice of upbeat, accessible samples likely contributed to his success, which earned him praise well beyond the vaporwave community after *Hit Vibes*.

¹²⁷ Saint Pepsi, *STUDIO 54*, Digital, 2013, 54, <https://saintpepsi.bandcamp.com/album/studio-54>.

¹²⁸ C Monster, "SAINT PEPSI - Empire Building," Tiny Mix Tapes, February 19, 2013, <https://www.tinymixtapes.com/chocolate-grinder/listen-saint-pepsi-empire-building>.

¹²⁹ Birkut, "SAINT PEPSI - HIT VIBES," Tiny Mix Tapes, June 10, 2013, <https://www.tinymixtapes.com/music-review/saint-pepsi-hit-vibes>.

Journalists began describing DeRobertis as an artist whose popularity and quality had transcended vaporwave's marginal status. One previously-cited article by Vice deemed DeRobertis the single worthwhile vaporwave artist,¹³⁰ and music site Stereogum praised the producer's potential to "reach an audience beyond the tight-knit core of genre fans" with his ability to "[move] completely beyond anything you can pin down with a simple genre tag."¹³¹ DeRobertis, however, demonstrated no desire to leave that community behind, instead creating an artist collective in hopes of supporting other vaporwave producers.¹³² Unlike chillwave and witch house, where popular artists had few social connections with one another, high-profile vaporwave producers were deeply invested in fostering the genre's budding community.

While journalists praised DeRobertis as an emerging star, a subset of vaporwave listeners 4chan viewed him and other new producers with contempt. The most frequent complaint held that these artists prioritized quantity of output over quality—that "they throw out albums ridiculously fast, all of them the exact same fucking thing over and over again. And each and every song is just a run of the mill disco song that's looped at the exact same 5 or so parts, then slowed down a bit."¹³³ Many of these critics also claimed that such a lack of creativity further demonstrated vaporwave's death as a relevant genre.

Vaporwave was pretty much dead by November 2012 when people like Internet Club and Vektroid abandoned vaporwave for other various offshoots. It was also around that time that Saint Pepsi and Luxury Elite who shit out half-assed generic vaporwave like they get paid for it, which they most likely do, took over.

¹³⁰ Bennett, "Here's Saint Pepsi's Remix of Erik Hassle's 'Talk About It.'"

¹³¹ Miles Bowe, "Band to Watch: SAINT PEPSI," Stereogum, July 26, 2013, <https://www.stereogum.com/1409361/band-to-watch-saint-pepsi/franchises/band-to-watch/>.

¹³² Russell Thomas, "Next: New Generation," Dummy, November 15, 2013, <https://www.dummymag.com/features/next-saint-pepsi-and-new-generation/>.

¹³³ Anonymous, "No.36714614," 4chan, June 1, 2013, <https://archive.rebeccablacktech.com/mu/thread/36712485/#q36714614>.

Anyone who didn't move on to other microgenres or vaporwave derivatives, or began making straight vapor after November were hopping on a dead bandwagon.¹³⁴

Alongside DeRobertis, the anonymous producer Luxury Elite appeared most frequently in these criticisms. This attention stemmed partly from the booming popularity of her own work, such as the “screwed” 1980s pop of her album *III*. Especially popular was her split album with DeRobertis, *LATE NIGHT DELIGHT*, which she opened with an edited loop of Michael Jackson’s 1979 hit “Rock With You.”¹³⁵ Alongside her production work, though, Luxury Elite garnered notoriety through her creation of the label Fortune 500, which quickly became one of the most popular sources of vaporwave. During its brief heyday, Fortune 500 released albums by a variety of artists (including Luxury Elite and Ryan DeRobertis) and co-produced the previously-cited SPF420 spinoff festival named Fortune 420. All of these activities were instrumental in driving vaporwave’s popularity, providing music for new and pre-existing fans as well as a performance environment for community members to bond within.

Such popularity triggered the aforementioned backlash, and Ryan DeRobertis and Luxury Elite soon became tagged with the epithet “broporwave”: a derisive portmanteau of “bro” and “vaporwave” indicating a genre takeover by undiscerning producers. The term spread on 4chan in late June after one user posted a tract denouncing this takeover, arguing that these producers had turned vaporwave into “Chillwave: Part 2,” and that the creative process consisted of merely “taking a moderately obscure 80’s pop, funk, or RnB song, slowing it down by the exact same

¹³⁴ Anonymous, “No.36422579,” *4chan*, May 23, 2013, <https://archive.rebeccablacktech.com/mu/thread/36419958/#q36422579>.

¹³⁵ LUXURY ELITE and SAINT PEPSI, *Late Night Delight*, Digital, 2013, <https://luxuryelite.bandcamp.com/album/late-night-delight>.

amount each time, sometimes lazily chopping 1 or 2 minor parts, and calling it a day.”¹³⁶ This chillwave comparison paralleled Adam Harper’s article from the following month, and Harper actually discussed “broporwave” in that piece, taking issue with the post’s crude language while sharing its concerns. Fortune 500 even appeared in both the “broporwave” image and Harper’s article, with the latter echoing community arguments that the label prioritized quantity over quality and singling out SPF420’s Chaz Allen as a prime offender “driving the genre into cliché and collapse.”¹³⁷ Bandcamp might have been full of vaporwave releases, but for some listeners that volume of output hardly constituted a fount of creativity. Less than a year after its purported death, vaporwave now encompassed a range of styles so broad that, for some, it challenged the genre’s coherence.

However, these new artists were still *popular*. And in keeping with this popularity, plenty of listeners were far less sympathetic to complaints about “broporwave.” One suggested that the criticisms were little more than elitism and posturing for subcultural clout, if not a gambit for publicity created by the musicians in question.¹³⁸ And on 4chan, plenty of posters expressed their enjoyment of these producers, describing naysayers as hypocritical.

You shouldn't attack people just 'cause you feel like the scene is over saturated. Ever notice what happens in these threads when somebody post shit that's out of the vapor norm? People respond with shit like "This isn't vaporwave", and though these statements usually aren't attacks (praise tends to be coupled) they're still

¹³⁶ Anonymous, “No.37757436,” *4chan*, June 30, 2013, <https://archive.rebeccablacktech.com/mu/thread/37752952/#q37757436>; “The ‘Broporwave’ Tract: A Vaporwave Polemic,” *Another County Heard* (blog), July 7, 2013, <http://anothercountyheard.blogspot.com/2013/07/the-broporwave-tract-vaporwave-polemic.html>.

¹³⁷ Harper, “Essay: Invest in Vaporwave Futures!”

¹³⁸ “The ‘Broporwave’ Tract: A Vaporwave Polemic,” *Another County Heard* (blog), July 7, 2013, <http://anothercountyheard.blogspot.com/2013/07/the-broporwave-tract-vaporwave-polemic.html>.

silly. Look at you. You're pushing people to escape the vapor norm but you know as soon as they do they won't be "vaporwave" anymore.¹³⁹

According to these listeners, critics cornered new producers into a lose-lose dilemma. If these artists released music in the vein of Robin Burnett and Ramona Xavier, they could be panned as imitators; if they began expanding vaporwave's stylistic template with influences from dance music, hip-hop, and R&B, they could be condemned as genre traitors.

But by late 2013, vaporwave's range of sounds were so compelling that even Adam Harper tempered his prior pessimism. Listing his top vaporwave albums of the year, Harper described how the genre had "ballooned;" and though he still bemoaned the formulaic nature of many releases, the critic found much more to celebrate in vaporwave's newfound diversity than he did in July. For example, Harper championed New Zealand producer Luke Rowell (aka Eyeliner) as a compelling example of "new-composed" vaporwave: songs built from original sounds instead of samples. Harper also praised dance-oriented releases from Ryan DeRobertis and the anonymous マクロスMACROSS 82-99, though he admitted that these "non-conceptual edits of funk, disco, and...pop" sometimes fell beyond his conception of vaporwave.¹⁴⁰ Given the emergence of both "new-composed" and uptempo "post-vaporwave" styles, Harper questioned whether future definitions of vaporwave would hinge on sampling or specific musical traits.

¹³⁹ Anonymous, "No.38040325," *4chan*, July 9, 2013, 380, <https://archive.rebeccablacktech.com/mu/thread/38022274/#q38040325>.

¹⁴⁰ Adam Harper, "Pattern Recognition Vol. 8.5: The Year in Vaporwave," *Electronic Beats*, December 5, 2013, <https://www.electronicbeats.net/vol-8-5-the-year-in-vaporwave/>.

Ultimately, community members would answer this question. Producers capitalized on vaporwave's popularity by tagging their music as such on Bandcamp, listeners debated whether or not the releases belonged within the genre's boundaries, and bit by bit the new crop of producers won out. An enthusiastic fanbase and the passage of time eased the sting of purported transgressions, and listeners gradually began describing vaporwave less as a static set of characteristics and more as a spectrum ranging "from the dance pop tracks from saint pepsi [sic] to the low calm and entrancing tracks from other more established vaporwave producers."¹⁴¹ Acceptance of this spectrum definition was slow to take hold, though. Debates over genre definition continued to rage the following year, coalescing around a less derogatory term than "broporwave" for the dance music created by producers like Ryan DeRobertis. And even after those debates subsided, the same tension between genre coherence and diversity would recur throughout the rest of the decade.

¹⁴¹ Anonymous, "No.38573309," *4chan*, July 27, 2013, <https://archive.rebeccablacktech.com/mu/thread/38569977/#q38573309>.

CHAPTER 2: A COMMUNITY FLOURISHES

Vaporwave's stylistic expansion continued unabated into 2014, further solidifying its status as a Scene-based genre with robust community discourse and prominent organizing institutions. The previous year's debates over new stylistic influences continued, with many centering on the newly-coined subgenre "future funk": an uptempo variant built from disco samples and often paired with visuals from 1990s Japanese animation. Spearheaded by producers like SAINT PEPSI, future funk bore little stylistic resemblance to traditional vaporwave, but musicians continued to include the latter tag in their metadata, and the two genres circulated in the same social sphere. Early vaporwave and future funk discourse thrived on the discussion board 4chan, a site where rhetoric trends hostile or even abusive. This aggression clashed with the optimistic tenor of future funk, which exhibited a more earnest form of nostalgia than traditional vaporwave. Supporters of future funk eventually prevailed, and the style slowly became accepted as one swath of a broader taxonomy of vaporwave genres. Since vaporwave had become so multifaceted that only metadata tags and the surrounding community held it together, many listeners demonstrated a great deal of passion in defining its subgenres. Categorization not only oriented listeners amid stylistic diversity, it also served as its own source of pleasure, aligning with audience practices on database sites like RateYourMusic. Amid such enthusiasm, many listeners tired of 4chan's hostility and migrated to Reddit, where a dedicated vaporwave forum provided a more focused hub for discussions. At the same time, artists created record labels to network and promote new releases, further structuring community activities. Between ongoing tensions over genre definitions, a popular discussion forum, and

fledgling record labels, vaporwave continued to share many similarities with offline genres of decades past.

Future Funk

Community debates over “broporwave” continued into 2014, though traditionalists were fighting a losing battle. Broporwave producers—particularly those creating dance tracks from disco samples—grew more popular than any prior vaporwave artist; with this popularity came a growing consensus that vaporwave could encompass a variety of sounds and moods. Disco-based vaporwave was soon termed “future funk,” with the label earning a place in the community’s developing taxonomy of subgenre categories. Like punk scenes of decades past, vaporwave listeners had “[an] ardent dedication to, if not obsession with, discussing intricate questions of musical style with a relatively coherent set of conventions guiding that discussion.”¹⁴² Those conventions found concrete expression in metadata tags and subgenre labels, which were highly contested in such a period of flux. Vaporwave’s relationship to irony—previously seen as an essential component of the genre—was even up for debate. Future funk embodied a more optimistic form of nostalgia than traditional vaporwave, which made for more overtly sincere forms of expression in the community. Meanwhile, press treatments of vaporwave continued to prioritize irony. Though critics played an early, vital role in defining and popularizing vaporwave, their influence now paled in comparison to a robust online community of musicians and listeners. The scene, not the press, now defined the genre.

¹⁴² David Pearson, *Rebel Music in the Triumphant Empire: Punk Rock in the 1990s United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 9–10.

As with many other Internet terms, the first use of “future funk” is unclear, though the phrase appears on 4chan in a variety of musical contexts through the early 2010s. An early example of the term’s association with vaporwave came in July 2013, when one user asked if Saint Pepsi’s album *Hit Vibes* was vaporwave or future funk.¹⁴³ Future funk’s association with vaporwave strengthened through early 2014, when a poster commented that Saint Pepsi “became good the moment he ditched vaporwave and moved on to Future Funk,”¹⁴⁴ and マクロスMACROSS 82-99 earned a similar description that same month.¹⁴⁵ By summer, the genre had become so popular on 4chan that one user asked if future funk could be “the genre of 2014,” invoking a faddishness common to previous discussions of Internet music genres like witch house.¹⁴⁶

Despite this new flurry of attention, future funk was a new, less derogatory name for a familiar trend. As one 4chan user summarized, “future funk is stuff like saint pepsi, mike tenay, macross, also known as broporwave”¹⁴⁷ Where early vaporwave by the likes of INTERNET CLUB was often lethargic and murky, future funk was energetic and bright, reworking samples of disco and other dance styles from the 1970s and 1980s. This stylistic departure, along with a purported lack of quality control among artists and labels, fueled the original crop of broporwave criticisms, and some listeners leveled

¹⁴³ Anonymous, “No.38244738,” *4chan*, July 16, 2013, <https://archive.rebeccablacktech.com/mu/thread/38244699/#q38244738>.

¹⁴⁴ Anonymous, “No.46142884,” *4chan*, April 19, 2014, <https://archive.rebeccablacktech.com/mu/thread/46138338/#q46142884>.

¹⁴⁵ Anonymous, “No.46046452,” *4chan*, April 15, 2014, <https://archive.rebeccablacktech.com/mu/thread/46041219/#q46046452>.

¹⁴⁶ Anonymous, “No.48302387,” *4chan*, July 15, 2014, <https://archive.rebeccablacktech.com/mu/thread/48302387/#q48302387>.

¹⁴⁷ Anonymous, “No.49802860,” *4chan*, September 11, 2014, <https://archive.rebeccablacktech.com/mu/thread/49801145/#q49802860>.

similar complaints at future funk. Referencing the popular future funk label Keats Collective, one 4chan user vented that “‘nu-disco’ or future funk, or whatever people call it these days is already played out, just look at keats//collective, they shit out this stuff every week and it all sounds exactly the same. I've actually gone through all of it, and you even start hearing the same songs being sampled over and over.”¹⁴⁸

Other listeners were less overtly hostile towards future funk, though they questioned its relevance to vaporwave. One 4chan user, responding to a post asking if MACROSS and Saint Pepsi were vaporwave artists, wrote “i've heard the name 'future funk' thrown around but to me it sounds like french house with very minimal vaporwave influence.”¹⁴⁹ Popularized in the 1990s by artists like Daft Punk, French house producers often sample disco from past decades and use EQ filters to create a “pulsing” sound, one similar to that heard in future funk. That same month, another user posted a link to a YouTube music video posted by popular future funk channel Artzie Music,¹⁵⁰ asking if the remix qualified as vaporwave. Given the track’s familiar sonic qualities, one poster responded that “everything on Artzie music is broporwave,” while another wrote “no, thats Future Funk/French House.”¹⁵¹

Debates over future funk’s stylistic divergence from traditional vaporwave continued through the summer, reaching a peak in early August after one user posted a collage of albums under the title “The Vaporwave Essentials Guide: Ultra Edition.” Like

¹⁴⁸ Anonymous, “No.46629214,” *4chan*, May 7, 2014, <https://archive.rebeccablacktech.com/mu/thread/46626806/#46629214>.

¹⁴⁹ Anonymous, “No.48407414,” *4chan*, July 20, 2014, <https://archive.rebeccablacktech.com/mu/thread/48396582/#q48407414>.

¹⁵⁰ *Aikatsu - Trap of Love (SUPERSEX420 Edit) - YouTube*, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fQIZOmD5T04>.

¹⁵¹ Anonymous, “No.48169297,” *4chan*, July 10, 2020, <https://archive.rebeccablacktech.com/mu/thread/48149494/#48169297>.

past guides created by 4chan users, this collage formed a canon of records its creator deemed representative of different vaporwave styles. Supplemental text provided historical context, definitions of terms, and a list of the most prominent vaporwave labels.¹⁵² Listener responses ranged from appreciative to hostile, and in keeping with the previous months' debates, the guide's inclusion of future funk proved most controversial. As one user wrote, "future funk barely has anything to do with vaporwave besides ripping off some of the visuals of it. Your chart is shit, get over it. Future funk isn't even the biggest problem with your shitty chart."¹⁵³ Others concurred in less abrasive terms, disputing the guide's use of terms like "Classic Style", and another specifically disagreed with the inclusion of SAINT Pepsi's album *Hit Vibes*.¹⁵⁴ While journalists had praised *Hit Vibes* as an excellent vaporwave album deserving of its broader popularity, the genre's most passionate community members were far more divided.

As in the previous year's discussions of broporwave, critics of future funk often credited the genre with vaporwave's demise. In October, one user posted a pseudo-medical timeline of vaporwave's history, identifying a "broporvirus" infection in late 2012, death from "an opportunistic infection of future funk" in late 2013, and a fleeting resurrection by newcomers in the second half of 2014. "Kids hear stories and legends about vaporwave and decide they want to dig up the grave to see it in its glory...After digging the decaying vaporcorpse up, they attach strings to what's left of its flesh and try

¹⁵² Anonymous, "Vaporwave," August 7, 2014, <https://archive.rebeccablacktech.com/mu/thread/48889515>.

¹⁵³ Anonymous, "No.48892243," *4chan*, August 7, 2014, <https://archive.rebeccablacktech.com/mu/thread/48889515/#q48892243>.

¹⁵⁴ Anonymous, "No.48890728," *4chan*, August 7, 2014, <https://archive.rebeccablacktech.com/mu/thread/48889515/#q48890728>.

to reenact stories of its life like a grotesque marionette, eventually growing bored and leaving it in a heap outside its violated grave.”¹⁵⁵ This listener’s visceral rhetoric speaks to both their intense investment in original vaporwave and their depth of outrage at newer developments. Similarly, another user at year’s end mourned vaporwave’s decline and offered “special shout outs to big league shitters who, after jumping on the vaporwave bandwagon, labelled their slowed down...abortions as 'future funk' and go on their merry way to this day.”¹⁵⁶ Again, the vitriol highlights just how much vaporwave mattered to these critics.

Even beyond future funk, proclamations of vaporwave’s death persisted on 4chan throughout the year. In June, one user asked for advice on making vaporwave; the very first response advised “a time machine. You'd need to go back to 2012 when it was relevant.”¹⁵⁷ And at the start of the year, another listener predicted greater musical diversity within a shrinking, forgotten community. “The genre is already dead, it will never grow bigger than it got late 2012; it will actually continue to get smaller. There's already been some more experimental vaporwave and a pushing of the aesthetic limits. I think it will be a much better year than 2013 quite honestly, mostly because people have stopped giving a shit.”¹⁵⁸

Future funk disproved all of these predictions, neither killing nor shrinking vaporwave. Instead, the subgenre remained the most popular example of vaporwave’s

¹⁵⁵ Anonymous, “No.50531613,” *4chan*, October 10, 2014, <https://archive.rebeccablacktech.com/mu/thread/50528416/#q50531613>.

¹⁵⁶ Anonymous, “No.52487894,” *4chan*, accessed July 26, 2020, <https://archive.rebeccablacktech.com/mu/thread/52487389/#q52487894>.

¹⁵⁷ Anonymous, “No.47796703,” *4chan*, June 25, 2014, <https://archive.rebeccablacktech.com/mu/thread/47796678/#47796703>.

¹⁵⁸ Anonymous, “No.43042281,” *4chan*, January 2, 2014, <https://archive.rebeccablacktech.com/mu/thread/43038334/#q43042281>.

emerging stylistic pluralism. Such variety attracted scores of new listeners and producers who had no qualms including dance and hip-hop influences alongside traditional vaporwave. And as vaporwave's audience grew, a growing number of independent record labels arose to meet their appetite, posting new releases on Bandcamp with the requisite genre tags.

Record Labels and Shitposts

The vaporwave community flourished in 2014, creating record labels and a dedicated discussion forum that together created a more cohesive genre scene. Following the closure of Fortune 500, the first prominent vaporwave label, other musicians began creating their own labels to sign and promote artists. Though distribution was largely handled through Bandcamp, these independent, "do-it-yourself" (DIY) labels otherwise served similar functions to their offline counterparts, sometimes including the physical release of albums on cassette.¹⁵⁹ Labels like Dream Catalogue and Business Casual became focal points in the community, drawing both praise and ire along the way. As some listeners groused on 4chan about the popularity and financial success of these labels, others tired of the site's vitriol and migrated to a dedicated Reddit forum, where they hoped to have a discussion hub dedicated to the genre. This hub served a similar function to that of DIY punk "zines" (fan magazines) in decades past: self-published, noncommercial ventures that "encouraged direct modes of participation, from interaction between bands and audiences, to fans creating

¹⁵⁹ Andy Bennett and Paula Guerra, eds., "Introduction," in *DIY Cultures and Underground Music Scenes* (London: Routledge, 2018), 1.

media...to forming bands with little or no musical training.”¹⁶⁰ Listeners on Reddit exhibited a similar commitment to direct participation in the genre scene. With a robust network of record labels and a popular site for discussion, vaporwave enthusiasts created a far more organized and coherent genre community than existed a mere year before.

Adam Harper himself noted the significance of Internet record labels to independent music communities. To this day label owners often interact with one another on social media and collaborate on joint releases, creating a wide network of musicians and listeners despite the frequent lack of physical product or financial exchange. These labels pare traditional label activities back to curation and centralization, and like listeners, label heads mostly discover new artists through social contacts and release tags. However, labels face far fewer geographic restrictions than traditional labels. Among vaporwave labels, Harper named Illuminated Paths, Fortune 500, and Business Casual 87 as the community’s most prominent distributors, signing artists from countries around the world. According to Josh Rogers, head of Illuminated Paths, his label’s roster included producers from Poland, Morocco, and Indonesia, and his day-to-day operations were similarly mobile: “Where I’m based really has no bearing on how IP is run...I could truly be anywhere. Just so long as I am close to a wi-fi connection and a post office.”¹⁶¹

Vaporwave labels became an increasingly popular subject on 4chan as well, with users often citing the same entities as Adam Harper. Most popular—and most

¹⁶⁰ Pearson, *Rebel Music in the Triumphant Empire*, 6–7.

¹⁶¹ Adam Harper, “System Focus: Inside 1080p, Zoom Lens & the New Digital DIY Labels,” *The Fader*, June 4, 2014, <https://www.thefader.com/2014/06/04/system-focus-inside-1080p-zoom-lens-the-new-digital-diy-labels>.

controversial—among them were Dream Catalogue and Business Casual. British producer David Russo founded the former label in January, releasing his own music under aliases like Hong Kong Express before expanding to other artists. By July, listeners were praising Dream Catalogue as a possible successor to Fortune 500. The latter label had become a focal point for the community, given its rapid release schedule and the role of founder Luxury Elite in popularizing future funk. However, Fortune 500 closed in February 2014, leaving behind a void that other labels could fill. Dream Catalogue's July compilation *DREAM_31* even included a track by Luxury Elite, and one listener further solidified the connection by noting how Dream Catalogue “reminds me of f500 in its day how it was a real cohesive aesthetic and decent if not amazing wave.”¹⁶² Only a year ago, Fortune 500 appeared in the “broporwave” polemic as a blight on vaporwave; now, with the growing acceptance of future funk and other styles, the label was increasingly remembered as an integral part of the community.

Like Fortune 500, Dream Catalogue provided the vaporwave community with a steady stream of new releases and producers with a visible platform, quickly reaching a degree of popularity some listeners resented. In early October, one listener combined their praise for Dream Catalogue's role in sustaining vaporwave with frustration at the growing backlash:

I would argue vaporwave would be in a much worse state right now if it wasn't for Dream Catalogue. After F500 died I thought that would be the end for the genre, but they really stepped up and have carried it through the year. A niche genre like this really needs a central point and DC has provided that...People really need to be supporting it and stop needlessly bitching. It's almost as though some of you want vaporwave to die, the way you carry on.¹⁶³

¹⁶² Anonymous, “No.47922759,” *4chan*, July 1, 2014, <https://archive.rebeccablacktech.com/mu/thread/47912508/#q47922759>.

¹⁶³ Anonymous, “No.50389146,” *4chan*, October 4, 2014, <https://archive.rebeccablacktech.com/mu/thread/50368437/#q50389146>.

Peaking in October and November, this “carrying on” often included allegations of “viralling”: label operators posting praise for their releases under the guise of an average listener. For example, one 4chan user posted an image guide to twelve vaporwave subgenres, offering a short description and five album recommendations for each entry. And while some listeners responded appreciatively, others were more suspicious. One poster asserted that “the albums listed are blatant plugs, and a desperate attempt at elaborate viralling,” and another specifically accused the guide of being “put together by the dream catalog marketing team.”¹⁶⁴ In this thread and others, critics argued that such guerilla marketing violated vaporwave’s independent spirit and threatened the genre’s very existence: “Vaporwave is an underground genre populated predominantly by new, independent artists, and it’s completely against the ethos for DC to try to snuff out other talent through the sheer bulk of their surreptitious advertising. DC is going to fucking kill vaporwave, mark my words.”¹⁶⁵

Beyond viralling allegations, others took issue with Dream Catalogue selling their music rather than releasing albums for free. “Charging for vaporwave is not only pretty slimy, but it subverts the entire purpose of vaporwave in the first place...If there’s any force that’s killing vaporwave right now, it’s Dream Catalogue.”¹⁶⁶ These critics viewed vaporwave as fundamentally subversive force, one corrupted by any and all financial exchange. Complaints of ubiquity and unethical profit paralleled the previous year’s

¹⁶⁴ Anonymous, “No.50343737,” *4chan*, October 2, 2014, <https://archive.rebeccablacktech.com/mu/thread/50343737>.

¹⁶⁵ Anonymous, “No.51098806,” *4chan*, November 1, 2014, <https://archive.rebeccablacktech.com/mu/thread/51095424/#q51098806>.

¹⁶⁶ Anonymous, “No.50949835,” *4chan*, October 26, 2014, <https://archive.rebeccablacktech.com/mu/thread/50925328/#q50949835>.

controversies, with one listener describing Dream Catalogue's release schedule in terms similar to those used to denigrate Fortune 500: "their strategy is to flood their listeners with as many releases as possible and hope some catch on in the pile of shit they're spewing."¹⁶⁷ Some listeners were quick to point out the historical parallels. After one 4chan user noted that accusations of viralling were impossible to refute, another concurred that "this is what happened with Dream Catalogue. Same thing happened in 2013 with Fortune 500, I remember the hate they used to get...and way before all that, Vektroid had the same treatment. People just don't like it when other people become successful."¹⁶⁸ And similarly, another poster in early November challenged critiques of Dream Catalogue's quality and omnipresence, arguing that

A lot of the year's best vaporwave albums have been on Dream Catalogue. They're really the best thing going in vaporwave right now to find the best new releases...there's still a whole lot of great unsigned producers out there, but DC is a great place to find new stuff. It's typical that you guys have started hating on them as soon as they get popular, just like what you did to Macross, Saint Pepsi, Fortune 500 Eco Virtual and Blank Banshee. It's such a childish mentality.¹⁶⁹

Business Casual, the other breakout vaporwave label of 2014, charted a similar trajectory since its creation the previous year. Founded by Pittsburgh producer John Zobebe (better known as christ+++), Business Casual released over twenty albums in its first year of operation and received little attention from vaporwave listeners on 4chan. One notable exception came in July 2013, when a disgruntled poster described Business Casual as a scourge on par with the then-controversial label Fortune 500:

¹⁶⁷ Anonymous, "No.50621826," *4chan*, October 13, 2014, <https://archive.rebeccablacktech.com/mu/thread/50621234/#q50621826>.

¹⁶⁸ Anonymous, "No.50952578," *4chan*, October 26, 2014, <https://archive.rebeccablacktech.com/mu/thread/50925328/#50952578>.

¹⁶⁹ Anonymous, "No.51099979," *4chan*, November 1, 2014, <https://archive.rebeccablacktech.com/mu/thread/51095424/#q51099979>.

“fuck Business Casual and everyone on them so fucking much. They've surpassed Fortune500 in weighing down the genre in broporwave shit. They're a cancer.”¹⁷⁰ The following summer, Business Casual began appearing much more frequently in vaporwave threads on 4chan, and by August, listeners were drawing direct comparisons with Dream Catalogue and asking which label was the genre's best.¹⁷¹

As with Dream Catalogue, much of this attention was negative. For example, one poster compared Business Catalogue to its peers in extremely unfavorable terms: “DC is probably the only good vaporwave label since Fortune 500 closed and BOTR [Beer on the Rug] stopped releasing vaporwave last year. Ailanthus is not bad but they're hit or miss and haven't released anything good for a while. Business Casual is shitty...future funk garbage, but not even the passable future funk like Stratford CT.”¹⁷² One October thread turned particularly vicious, devolving into accusations that various posters were the operators of Business Casual or Dream Catalogue, each purportedly venting their hatred for the other under the cover of anonymity.¹⁷³ Once again, though, these allegations were impossible to prove given users' ability to post on 4chan without a username.

While these arguments continued through the final months of 2014, other listeners expressed their frustrations with the predictable, hostile nature of vaporwave threads on 4chan. One dismissed the constant comparisons between Dream Catalogue

¹⁷⁰ Anonymous, “No.38377650,” *4chan*, July 21, 2013, <https://archive.rebeccablacktech.com/mu/thread/38372599/#q38377650>.

¹⁷¹ Anonymous, “No.48781165,” *4chan*, August 3, 2014, <https://archive.rebeccablacktech.com/mu/thread/48752993/#q48781165>.

¹⁷² Anonymous, “No.50388123,” *4chan*, October 4, 2014, <https://archive.rebeccablacktech.com/mu/thread/50368437/#q50388123>.

¹⁷³ Anonymous, “No.50621234,” *4chan*, October 13, 2014, <https://archive.rebeccablacktech.com/mu/thread/50621234>.

and Business Casual, asking “why can't we enjoy both? These vaporwave threads are so consumed with hatred and jealousy that it spoils the fun for everyone. Instead of being so hateful, why can't you guys focus on your own work instead?”¹⁷⁴ Another worried that frequent bickering threatened vaporwave's longevity: “If you want this genre to grow and stay alive then mindlessly shitting over the two biggest labels isn't going to help...Why would anyone who may be interested in vaporwave want to stay interested if they come into these threads and see nothing but fighting?”¹⁷⁵ Finally, one user aptly summarized the entire tenor of 4chan with a list: “people bitching about dream catalogue viralling (or viralling in general)...creating a new chart every month because nobody can agree on one...Floral Shoppe is the only good album...Yep it's a vaporwave thread.”¹⁷⁶

Thanks in part to the often-vitriolic nature of 4chan discourse, much of online vaporwave discussion moved to the social media site Reddit in 2014. Even 4chan users noted the shift, with one remarking that “no one likes talking about vaporwave on /mu/...[they] all emigrated to /r/vaporwave cause you're all retarded and want to shitpost.”¹⁷⁷ “Shitposting” describes a type of forum or social media post that intends to provoke others and derail conversations. Shitposts are of intentionally low-quality, contributing little of overt value to the subject at hand, and 4chan is a site rife with such content. “/r/vaporwave” refers to the genre's “subreddit”: a smaller forum within Reddit

¹⁷⁴ Anonymous, “No.50624184,” *4chan*, October 13, 2014, <https://archive.rebeccablacktech.com/mu/thread/50621234/#q50624184>.

¹⁷⁵ Anonymous, “No.51130181,” *4chan*, November 3, 2014, <https://archive.rebeccablacktech.com/mu/thread/51118603/#q51130181>.

¹⁷⁶ Anonymous, “No.50425128,” *4chan*, October 5, 2014, <https://archive.rebeccablacktech.com/mu/thread/50419467/#q50425128>.

¹⁷⁷ P, “No.51493260,” *4chan*, November 17, 2014, <https://archive.rebeccablacktech.com/mu/thread/51480336/#51493260>.

dedicated to a specific topic. Users can submit text, images, and links for others to view and comment on, and if interested, users can “subscribe” for notifications of subreddit activity. While the vaporwave subreddit was first created in July 2012 “as a joke,” it initially gained little traction among listeners.¹⁷⁸ However, traffic spiked in November 2013 with nearly triple the previous month’s number of posts, foreshadowing the subreddit’s growth to come. While r/vaporwave received only 323 posts in its first year and a half of existence, subscribers passed that mark by mid-March 2014 and went on to submit over four thousand posts within the calendar year.¹⁷⁹ Subscriber count was similarly explosive in 2014, jumping from 765 listeners to over 7,200.¹⁸⁰

This growth owed much to a broader increase in Internet searches for vaporwave, a trend noted by subreddit members themselves,¹⁸¹ but subscribers also worked to foster a stronger sense of community in the face of an inactive moderator. In March, a user requested subreddit control from Reddit administrators, describing how they “messed the mod twice over the course of the past month asking his plans for the subreddit with no response.”¹⁸² And while these efforts failed despite the

¹⁷⁸ RXkings, *Reddit*, May 8, 2015, https://www.reddit.com/r/SubredditDrama/comments/35ajzd/in_rvaporwave_one_brave_user_takes_a_stand/cr2m5ow/.

¹⁷⁹ I wrote a computer code that amassed every post on the vaporwave subreddit from the 2010s. The resulting dataset served as both a method for discovering the comments and posts cited throughout, and for identifying quantitative trends like this one.

¹⁸⁰ “R/Vaporwave Metrics,” Metrics for Reddit, August 17, 2020, <https://frontpagemetrics.com/r/Vaporwave>.

¹⁸¹ eternalstairmaster, “Vaporwave Recent Spike - Google Trend,” *Reddit*, June 18, 2014, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/28in1j/vaporwave_recent_spike_google_trend/.

¹⁸² Thathipsterkid, “Hey Guys! Since Our Only Mod RXkings Last Post Was over 2 Months Ago, I’ve Requested to Take the Role. Really Hoping This Gets Accepted so We Can Finally Get That Nice CSS/Flair Jazz This Awesome Sub Deserves!,” *Reddit*, March 12, 2014, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/209o2j/hey_guys_since_our_only_mod_rxkings_last_post_was/.

moderator's absence,¹⁸³ an August post announced a host of subreddit changes, including the successful installation of new leadership, and solicited subscribers for ideas and moderator applications.¹⁸⁴ These changes included weekly discussion threads on both general topics and music production, which incentivized subscribers to participate on the subreddit more regularly.

Subreddit discussions quickly marked a notable contrast from 4chan's rhetoric, with subscribers often posting longer and less hostile comments than their counterparts on the latter site. For example, one post asked for a "genuine conversation" on the abundance of "lazy" vaporwave tracks squandering the genre's potential. But despite the familiarity of their argument, users (including the owner of Dream Catalogue) never completely adopted the vicious tone common to 4chan.¹⁸⁵ Similarly, most responses to a July submission of 4chan's "broporwave" polemic dismissed the image's cynicism. One user even compared vaporwave to a form of ancient Greek sculpture, reflecting on how both challenge prevailing assumptions that artistic expression must be wholly unique.¹⁸⁶

Given the cynical nature of many 4chan discussions, extensive comments like these were far more common on Reddit, where listeners often posted in great detail on

¹⁸³ Thathipsterkid, *Reddit*, July 10, 2014, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/2a8wdp/is_there_any_way_we_can_make_the_mod_come_back_or/citqph9/.

¹⁸⁴ angrypotato1, "Under New Leadership, What Would You like to See Happening?," *Reddit*, August 19, 2014, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/2dyfhn/under_new_leadership_what_would_you_like_to_see/.

¹⁸⁵ volumeplease, "Can We Have a Genuine Conversation on How Lazy and Ignorant Vaporwave Is?," *Reddit*, December 8, 2014, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/2omm76/can_we_have_a_genuine_conversation_on_how_lazy/.

¹⁸⁶ "Can We Just Clear This the Fuck up Already?," *Reddit*, July 1, 2014, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/29lekl/can_we_just_clear_this_the_fuck_up_already/.

a variety of subjects, particularly on their definitions of and relationships to vaporwave. Genre definitions frequently centered on listeners' emotional responses to music rather than a set of sonic qualities, which fit with vaporwave's ongoing stylistic expansion. In response to a post suggesting that merely slowing down a song qualified as vaporwave, one user disagreed, commenting that "contrary to what a lot of people are doing these days, vaporwave isn't just defined by a slowed down and pitch shifted song. It's about the feeling that it evokes; 80's and 90's consumerism, early internet era, tech surrealism etc. This can be originally produced or made with creative use of samples as opposed to lazily slowing it down in audacity."¹⁸⁷ Listeners argued similar points in other threads, sometimes using more figurative language. In early March, user hopsonpop wrote that

the aesthetic is about the promise of the early 90's, the bright new future brought to you by Microsoft and Coca Cola, available at the touch of a button, brought to you by satellite in live color. it's false, forced nostalgia for a time when the dread and hopelessness of the Cold War gave in entirely to the contrived, store-bought, ready-in-3-microwave-minutes promise of 80's consumerism."¹⁸⁸

In keeping with press coverage of vaporwave, listeners frequently rooted their definitions in nostalgia for the 1980s and 1990s. However, many explicitly challenged the accuracy of that nostalgia, describing the memories as warped or disconnected from reality. One user wrote "I don't think the aesthetic of vaporwave is about a 'genuine' nostalgia for those times. To me it is more like a portal into some kind of alternate past where things are familiar but also sort of "off" in an unsettling way."¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁷ IM_A_FUCKING_BEAR, *Reddit*, July 31, 2014, https://www.removeddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/2c9ur1/what_is_considered_vaporwave_music/.

¹⁸⁸ hopsonpop, *Reddit*, March 7, 2014, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/1zspzo/so_i_just_heard_the_term_vaporwave_last_week_and/cfwteyw/?utm_source=reddit&utm_medium=web2x&context=3.

¹⁸⁹ horus7, *Reddit*, May 20, 2014, 7, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/260a1y/how_many_of_you_are_old_enough_to_remember_the_80s/chn6vkn/?utm_source=reddit&utm_medium=web2x&context=3.

Nostalgia and time also figured heavily in listeners' interpretations of vaporwave—another fruitful topic of discussion. In September, a user asked the forum “what does vaporwave ‘say/mean’ to you,” describing their own perception of the genre as “unyieldingly critical, whether of it's [sic] source material, older eras, modern eras, or even of ourselves...these songs bring me to that idealized, "nostalgic" place at their most upbeat, and bring me to my most anxious, questioning moments at their most unsettling.” Most listeners responded along similar lines. One briefly cited “nostalgia and how commercialism affects our memories,” another described their “melancholy. Reflection. Sadness and Joy all at once,” and a third singled out the genre’s use of corporate aesthetics: “there's that of mournful yet peaceful feeling of abandoning your dreams in exchange for comfort and stability. It's that wistful feeling of fantasizing about an escape from your boring reality, an escape that always seems out of reach.”¹⁹⁰ Other listeners posted similar sentiments on the subreddit through the fall of 2014, marking escapism through surreal nostalgia as one of the most common explanations for vaporwave’s appeal.¹⁹¹

Other subreddit discussions centered on more familiar topics, most notably the purported death of vaporwave. However, unlike previous years’ debates on 4chan, Reddit users were much more optimistic about the genre’s future. Even before the community’s explosive growth later in 2014, one listener described proclamations of

¹⁹⁰ MultiBugOrganism, “What Does Vaporwave ‘Say/Mean’ to You?,” *Reddit*, September 20, 2014, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/2gz5w5/what_does_vaporwave_saymean_to_you/.

¹⁹¹ shanoxilt, “[Discussion Question(s)] What Does Vaporwave Mean to You?,” *Reddit*, August 5, 2014, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/2cpsux/discussion_questions_what_does_vaporwave_mean_to/; ceruleancerise, “Hello, /R/Vaporwave! Why Are You a Fan of Vaporwave?,” *Reddit*, September 8, 2020, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/2fs9iy/hello_rvaporwave_why_are_you_a_fan_of_vaporwave/; [deleted], “Understanding Vaporwave,” *Reddit*, November 7, 2014, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/2ln4t0/understanding_vaporwave/.

genre death as an ironic strategy to reduce attention from undiscerning outsiders.¹⁹² As the year progressed, other users again asked if vaporwave was actually dead, and listeners continued to disagree.¹⁹³ Even a subgenre guide—originally posted on 4chan to intense backlash—was received far more warmly on the vaporwave subreddit.¹⁹⁴ This guide provided a brief overview of twelve subgenres, with five album recommendations for each, and to this day enjoys pride of place as a reference on the vaporwave subreddit. These styles include mallsoft (tracks edited to sound like background music in an old shopping mall), broken transmission (heavily-chopped audio collages by artists like Nmesh), and vaportrap (instrumental hip-hop that blends vaporwave and trap textures). And unlike on 4chan, most Reddit users accepted this taxonomy as accurate and useful. During these years, Reddit discussions were as passionate as those on 4chan, but included more earnest reflections and fewer shitposts, contributing to a particularly robust sense of genre community.

Thanks to the subreddit's optimistic tenor and influx of new subscribers, listeners began collaborating on vaporwave projects beyond creating and circulating music. In late August, Reddit user neopets95 announced their creation of the Vaporwave Library: a collection of over 90 gigabytes of music culled from file-sharing sites.¹⁹⁵ A few weeks later, the Vaporwave Library went online, with neopets95 announcing the project's aims

¹⁹² rastepust, *Reddit*, March 2014,

https://www.removeddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/20jgwm/_/cg47bm1/.

¹⁹³ SoDangAgitated, "What's Your Opinion on This Genre Being 'dead'?", *Reddit*, July 14, 2014, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/2anf3f/whats_your_opinion_on_this_genre_being_dead/; BorneTM, "Is Vaporwave Dying?", *Reddit*, November 28, 2014,

https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/2nobh1/is_vaporwave_dying/.

¹⁹⁴ [deleted], "Vaporwave Sub-Genres Guide from /Mu/," *Reddit*, October 2, 2014, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/2i53dt/vaporwave_subgenres_guide_from_mu/.

¹⁹⁵ neopets95, "The Vaporwave Library - Help Assemble World's Largest Vaporwave Collection!," *Reddit*, August 24, 2014, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/2eg64j/the_vaporwave_library_help_assemble_worlds/.

to the subreddit. “The main goal is to preserve these works of art. During my time collecting, I have found many broken links. Artists quit, change their minds, stop paying for hosting, a lot gets uploaded but even more gets lost. Still it is part of a culture, no matter how insignificant, so there must be [sic] effort to preserve it.”¹⁹⁶ The following month, neopets95 added more streaming and discovery tools to make the Library more user-friendly,¹⁹⁷ and in November they partnered with popular label Dream Catalogue, providing file hosting and a dedicated section of the Library.¹⁹⁸ Unfortunately, perhaps due to the cost of maintenance, the Vaporwave Library shut down sometime after fall 2015.¹⁹⁹

A similar enthusiasm motivated audiences’ early attempts to organize in-person vaporwave festivals. While one listener found little traction with their attempt to organize a UK concert,²⁰⁰ another seemed poised for success with their ambitious festival “Boogie at the Hypermall 20XX.” In December 2014, an organizer announced that the Boogie festival was scheduled for the following August, with “a dying shopping mall in Scranton, PA” serving as host. Popular artists like NMESH were slated to perform, while organizers were “in the process of talks” to present higher-profile artists like Daniel

¹⁹⁶ neopets95, “The Vaporwave Library Project - Now Online!,” *Reddit*, September 6, 2014, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/2fmxfi/the_vaporwave_library_project_now_online/.

¹⁹⁷ neopets95, “The Vaporwave Discovery Tool | The New Way to Discover Releases on the Library,” *Reddit*, October 28, 2014, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/2kmy84/the_vaporwave_discovery_tool_the_new_way_to/.

¹⁹⁸ [deleted], “Announcing a Partnership between The Vaporwave Library Project and Dream Catalogue...,” *Reddit*, November 2, 2014, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/2l3xje/announcing_a_partnership_between_the_vaporwave/.

¹⁹⁹ Internet Archive, “Wayback Machine,” Internet Archive, accessed September 26, 2020, https://web.archive.org/web/2015*/vaporwave.me.

²⁰⁰ anonyballz, “A UK Vaporwave Event!,” *Reddit*, November 2, 2014, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/2l2stq/a_uk_vaporwave_event/.

Lopatin and Saint Pepsi.²⁰¹ However, when festival organizers launched a crowdfunding campaign in January 2015, listeners responded with a slew of concerns both conceptual and practical. Some people took issue with the festival's location, describing the mall as "such a cornball idea...vaporwave should remain faceless and I don't like whole idea of this going on while others are actually shopping." Others felt the organizers were unclear about event logistics—particularly with a crowdfunding goal of \$20,000.²⁰² Because of the vaporwave community's lukewarm response to the festival, organizers only raised \$680 and cancelled their crowdfunding campaign one day later. Boogie at the Hypermall never materialized.²⁰³

Instead of a mall performance, one listener suggested, vaporwave would be far better-suited to "something like an art installation;"²⁰⁴ the following month, Dream Catalogue presented precisely that. Label head David Russo partnered with a digital culture festival to present "Virtualife": a three-night lounge/performance space built "to feel like you have walked into a real life vaporwave setting," with expected attendance of five to seven hundred people each evening.²⁰⁵ As evidenced by footage Russo

²⁰¹ NewWaveArch90, "We Are Partnering with R/Vaporwave and Others to Bring You the First LIVE VAPORWAVE FESTIVAL, Boogie at the Hypermall 20XX!," *Reddit*, December 2, 2014, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/2o11j4/we_are_partnering_with_rvaporwave_and_others_to/.

²⁰² [deleted], "THE KICKSTARTER IS LIVE! - BOOGIE AT THE HYPERMALL 20XX, THE PREMIER VAPORWAVE MUSIC FESTIVAL! MACROSS, SAINT PEPSI, MAC PLUS, BLANK BANSHEE, YUNG BAE, AND MANY MORE!," *Reddit*, January 16, 2015, https://www.removeddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/2snhgr/the_kickstarter_is_live_boogie_at_the_hypermall.

²⁰³ "BOOGIE AT THE HYPERMALL 20XX (Canceled)," Kickstarter, October 5, 2020, <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/784004997/boogie-at-the-hypermall-20xx>.

²⁰⁴ oscob, "THE KICKSTARTER IS LIVE! - BOOGIE AT THE HYPERMALL 20XX, THE PREMIER VAPORWAVE MUSIC FESTIVAL! MACROSS, SAINT PEPSI, MAC PLUS, BLANK BANSHEE, YUNG BAE, AND MANY MORE!," *Reddit*, January 16, 2015, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/2snhgr/the_kickstarter_is_live_boogie_at_the_hypermall/cnre2fu/.

²⁰⁵ [deleted], "Attention UK Vaporwave Fans - Dream Catalogue Is Putting on a Big Live Event at the End of February in Manchester," February 3, 2015,

posted soon after the event, Virtualife included many stylistic hallmarks of vaporwave, including heavy blue and purple lighting, turgid loops of mood music and adult contemporary, and flickering TV screens depicting obsolete computer graphics.²⁰⁶ And on Reddit, Russo was effusive about the event's success, concluding that "we figured out that doing vaporwave live can work...as both an art installation or a music performance - and to me, it feels like this is going to be the future of this genre/movement going forward, one of the biggest things that will take it to the next level."²⁰⁷ Within four months, others were organizing similar events, and while efforts like a Florida concert seemingly fell through, Virtualife's success represented a new frontier for the vaporwave community's development²⁰⁸.

All of these developments—the rise of popular record labels, the shift from Reddit to 4chan, the concerted efforts at preservation and offline events—speak to a thriving genre in Jennifer Lena's Scene-based stage. Far from a fledgling Avant-garde, vaporwave saw thousands of listeners band together online to define the genre and their sense of community. And while Lena's model suggests that an Industry stage was soon to come, the vaporwave community's divergence from prevailing press narratives complicated that possibility.

https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/2umk5y/attention_uk_vaporwave_fans_dream_catalogue_is/.

²⁰⁶ DREAM CATALOGUE, *VIRTUALIFE - 3 Nights of Live Vaporwave at the Future Everything Festival*, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0GhcKZcUtmY>.

²⁰⁷ dreamcatalogue, "It's the /R/Vaporwave Random Discussion Thread [Monday 02/03/2015]," *Reddit*, March 1, 2015, https://www.removeddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/2xmaiw/its_the_rvaporwave_random_discussion_thread/cp1f3q9/?utm_source=reddit&utm_medium=web2x&context=3.

²⁰⁸ [deleted], "Calling All Florida/South East US Vaporwave Artists," *Reddit*, June 7, 2015, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/38xpqe/calling_all_floridasouth_east_us_vaporwave_artists/.

Differing Definitions

By 2015, the vaporwave community had entered a period of relative stability. Many listeners accepted that the genre contained considerable stylistic variety, acting more as a broad conceptual term than a narrowly-defined entity. As discussed earlier, vaporwave could be ironic or sincere, and the genre could use a wide (though not limitless) range of tempos and timbres. What most qualified an artist as vaporwave was their connection to the genre scene through metadata and audience reception. As David Brackett argues, “no genre identity exists behind expressions of genre; genre is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results.”²⁰⁹ Metadata and audience reception constituted two of the most potent expressions of vaporwave, with each “citation” sustaining and shaping the genre. Most press treatments of vaporwave overlooked this point and continued to treat the genre as it was in 2012: a specific set of sonic and thematic parameters. And though journalists’ praise of future funk widened that lens in 2014, the lack of another popular new subgenre the following year made many proclaim the genre dead or otherwise worth ignoring. Vaporwave was a thriving genre in Lena’s Scene-based stage, but critics’ focus on style obscured that fact. In doing so, the press forestalled the capability of vaporwave to progress to the Industry-based stage in Lena’s model, which hinges on mainstream visibility.

During this era, some of the most influential vaporwave producers appeared on the genre subreddit, further cementing the forum’s role as a primary hub for community

²⁰⁹ Brackett, *Categorizing Sound*, 13.

discussion. Both Saint Pepsi²¹⁰ and Luxury Elite solicited listeners for questions, and when the latter described her creation of the record label Fortune 500, she did so in explicitly social terms.

All I wanted to do was give my friends a place to release their music, and I wanted it to be 100% vaporwave...[Sometime] I was talking to Saint Pepsi about F500 because we had just finished [joint album] *Late Night Delight* and he was really excited about it. He was eager to be the first release on there and thus, F500-1 was born: *Empire Building*. It sort of escalated from there.²¹¹

The entire future funk boom—from Luxury Elite and Saint Pepsi to Fortune 500—emerged from these community practices. And though she was initially a divisive figure, by 2015 Luxury Elite was viewed as a pioneer responsible in part for the genre’s rapid growth.

While notable figures grew more visible on the vaporwave subreddit, listeners continued discussing the genre’s foundational characteristics. As in 2014, these discussions often invoked extra-musical qualities like nostalgia, consumer electronics, and Japanese culture,²¹² and most listeners agreed that, after years of experimentation, vaporwave’s stylistic features were far more varied than the genre’s early works. For example, producers HKE and Telepath テレパシー能力者 incorporated lush textures and static tones commonly found in ambient with their album *2 8 1 4*, while artists like VAPERROR further popularized trap production styles with the album *Mana Pool*. Both albums met with acclaim and quickly became reference points for discussions of vaporwave’s stylistic hybridity. Even sampling, first seen as a foundational quality of

²¹⁰ aintpepsi, “FKA Saint Pepsi. Ask Me Anything!,” *Reddit*, July 8, 2015, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/3cl62x/fka_saint_pepsi_ask_me_anything/.

²¹¹ luxuryelite, “Hi, I’m Luxury Elite, and This Is an AMA.,” *Reddit*, July 21, 2015, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/3e3s2x/hi_im_luxury_elite_and_this_is_an_ama/.

²¹² MetatronLived, “[Discussion] What Is Vaporwave to You?,” *Reddit*, February 10, 2015, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/2vehqh/discussion_what_is_vaporwave_to_you/.

vaporwave, was increasingly seen by listeners as an option rather than a requirement, with producers like Eyeliner releasing popular music that most acknowledged as vaporwave.²¹³

Reflecting on the genre's increasingly loose boundaries, one listener forwarded three necessary qualities for music to be considered vaporwave: it must "make the user feel an alien feeling, or generally out of body...must be contained in 'packaging' that also evokes these feelings...[and must have] some sort of futuristic/dystopian feel, or 'world that never was' vibe." These aesthetic criteria fit within the vaporwave community's longstanding tradition of defining genre by emotion and multimedia aesthetics, rather than strictly musical characteristics. At the same time, the listener also noted the danger of drawing generic boundaries too loosely: "In the end I think this comes to the inherent problem with trying to classify experimental music, everything can be so different that it no longer holds any meaning."²¹⁴

While most listeners enjoyed this stylistic variety, a few viewed it as a threat to the genre's cohesion. One Reddit user asked if 2814 "completely ruined vaporwave," making it impossible to "determine the modern vapor away [sic] from say ambient/drone/idm/trap or house...It makes the genre no longer an actual genre but some weird Frankenstein mess of anything and everything."²¹⁵ For these types of listeners, ambient drones or trap hi-hats were too far removed from "true" vaporwave. The ensuing conversation reached eighty-six comments—a much higher number than

²¹³ roughsilk, "Does Anyone Make Vaporwave without Sampling?," *Reddit*, June 8, 2015, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/390jln/does_anyone_make_vaporwave_without_sampling/.

²¹⁴ lifeanddecay, "What Is Your Definition of Vaporwave?," *Reddit*, June 20, 2015, https://www.removeddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/3akhwo/what_is_your_definition_of_vaporwave/.

²¹⁵ [deleted], "Has 2814 Completely Ruined Vaporwave?," *Reddit*, September 14, 2015, https://www.removeddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/3kw49p/has_2814_completely_ruined_vaporwave.

most subreddit threads—with most users offering long, considered disagreements. HKE himself (also known as David Russo) even responded, offering a definition of genre that was both broad and inextricable from online distribution platforms. “Genre names are ultimately meaningless and act as nothing more than a tag to assort different brands/styles/scenes and such...I guess the best way to think of genres is an old-fashioned form of hashtagging, before the advent of the internet.”²¹⁶ Russo’s reference to hashtagging offers a sterling example of David Brackett’s concept of citationality, recognizing that linguistic invocations of genre through metadata *directly constitute* that genre.

While the vaporwave community continued to grow, press coverage of the genre waned. Adam Harper penned an informal farewell in his April column for *The Fader*, where he confirmed that vaporwave had stabilized and developed into something more lasting than a fad, with netlabels like Dream Catalogue releasing excellent music. However, Harper mourned vaporwave’s lost potential. Building on his aforementioned realization from August 2013, Harper named *Floral Shoppe* as the genre’s most formative release and argued that between the influence of that album and Saint Pepsi’s *Hit Vibes*, vaporwave became just as obsessed with the past as other swaths of indie music. Since his very first *Dummy* article, Harper was far more interested in vaporwave’s vision of the future rather than the past; and “even if [he did] need to step away from the white heat of the present for a bit—even if [he] did get [his] head fried by the future—[he wasn’t] about to get involved in nostalgia.”²¹⁷ Harper’s farewell reveals

²¹⁶ dreamcatalogue, *Reddit*, September 15, 2015, https://www.removeddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/3kw49p/_/cv24b8p/.

²¹⁷ Adam Harper, “If You’ve OD-Ed On The Internet, This Music Will Save You,” *The Fader*, April 4, 2015, <https://www.thefader.com/2015/04/04/adam-harper-on-soothing-sounds-from-east-asia>.

just how much power the community now had in defining vaporwave, with the aforementioned listener comments on nostalgia trumping the influence of any one journalist.

Tiny Mix Tapes also scaled back their coverage while still maintaining a more optimistic view of the genre. They published an interview with Joshua Rogers, head of vaporwave netlabel Illuminated Paths, and though Rogers bristled at being “lumped in the vaporwave category,” he was still willing to suggest his own definition of the genre: “[taking] any sample from the 50s to 80s new wave, and then contort[ing] its speed or original sonic functionality...generally just the sound of being in a memory cave.”²¹⁸ As in the aforementioned subreddit posts, Rogers took a broad view of vaporwave’s viable source material, and his description of a “memory cave” aligned with ongoing community emphases on nostalgia and figurative genre definitions.

Rogers also described his operational activities in ample detail, hoping that Illuminated Paths could serve as a platform for artists to eventually sign with a larger label. “Unlike Van Gogh’s work, I’m trying to get people recognized while they’re currently alive.”²¹⁹ But while netlabels like Illuminated Paths, Dream Catalogue, and Business Casual served as pillars of the vaporwave community, most press coverage of the genre paid them little mind. Instead, music sites other than Tiny Mix Tapes largely stuck to familiar tropes in 2015. At their most neutral, articles referenced vaporwave in relation to some event occurring outside the genre itself, like the Internet Archive’s

²¹⁸ C Monster, “Illuminated Paths,” Tiny Mix Tapes, June 25, 2015, <https://www.tinymixtapes.com/features/illuminated-paths>.

²¹⁹ Monster.

release of background music played in K-Mart stores between 1989 and 1992.²²⁰

Elsewhere, journalists combined praise of individual vaporwave artists with allusions to the genre's shoddy reputation. One Thump article praised *2814* by confessing that vaporwave is "better than it sounds, honestly,"²²¹ while FACT Magazine were even more direct in their list of the year's best albums. Having placed *I'll Try Living Like This* by death's dynamic shroud.wmv at #15, FACT began their praise with a challenge: "if you're sick of people teasing you about liking vaporwave, give them this album and watch how quickly they change their mind."²²²

As before, other writers still treated vaporwave as a fleeting joke: one example among many of listeners' and journalists' pitiable zeal for crafting genres out of thin air. Such coverage existed in the long shadow of chillwave and witch house, where journalists were understandably wary of inflating the significance of an Internet fad or joke. In October, The Fader included vaporwave in "A Recent History of Microgenres": brief cycles of hype and backlash where "some new microgenre was over the second it got a name, if it ever really existed to begin with."²²³ And after opening with frustration over the tenuous nature of "tropical house", a Pitchfork quiz published in May challenges readers to distinguish "real" genres, including vaporwave, from fictional counterparts. Unlike similar articles, though, the Pitchfork quiz even included a tentative definition of genre: "a descriptor of similar musical productions/artists which is repeated

²²⁰ Kyle Kramer, "Attention Shoppers: These K-Mart Soundtracks from the Early 90s Are Incredibly Lit," Noisey, October 12, 2015, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/64yqzj/old-k-mart-soundtracks-1989-1992.

²²¹ Thump, "Prepare to Get Deliriously Dreamy with Vaporwave Sensation 2814's Beyond-Blissful 'Shinjitsu No Koi,'" Thump, September 15, 2015, https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/qkann5/prepare-to-get-deliriously-dreamy-with-vaporwave-sensation-2814s-beyond-blissful-shinjitsu-no-koi.

²²² Chal Ravens et al., "The 50 Best Albums of 2015," FACT, December 9, 2015, <https://www.factmag.com/2015/12/09/the-50-best-albums-of-2015/>.

²²³ McDermott and Friedlander, "A Recent History of Microgenres."

in legitimate publications with full-time editors over some period of time.”²²⁴ Given this definition’s prioritization of “legitimate publications” over listener usage, Pitchfork’s treatment of vaporwave makes sense.

In light of this disconnect between audience and industry definitions of genre—between Internet activity and press coverage—speculation about vaporwave’s potential death once again emerged. In the press, vaporwave’s demise usually appeared as self-evident fact, as in *The Fader*’s brief history of microgenres, or as a result of appropriative media companies. On June 25, both MTV and Tumblr launched visual redesigns that borrowed heavily from the imagery of vaporwave and related Internet cultures, including outdated computer graphics, pastel colors, and Greco-Roman statues. The following day, *Motherboard* proclaimed that these redesigns “killed” vaporwave: that “in one fell swoop, both Tumblr and MTV have erased the cynical distance inherent in the digitally-bred aesthetics they champion.”²²⁵ Pearson feared that this co-optation of vaporwave completely gutted the genre’s capacity for political critique—still its essential quality in the eyes of many journalists. Journalists like Pearson still hewed to an older definition of vaporwave, one more beholden to ironic statements on corporate avarice than sincere celebrations of the past.

Given a thriving Internet community and a wealth of apolitical vaporwave, listeners online usually responded to such speculation with dismissals and humor, often noting how frequently the subject of genre death resurfaced. Reddit commenters mocked *Motherboard*’s proclamation as out-of-touch, noting the site’s presumption that

²²⁴ Coleman, “Quiz: Is This a Real Genre.”

²²⁵ Jordan Pearson, “How Tumblr and MTV Killed the Neon Anti-Corporate Aesthetic of Vaporwave,” *Motherboard*, June 26, 2015, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/539v9a/tumblr-and-mtv-killed-vaporwave.

vaporwave categorically included political critique.²²⁶ And earlier that year, when a new community member asked if vaporwave was truly dead, one user argued that “it’s hard to take [these]...statements seriously; they’re really just memetic,” while another responded with the pithy statement that “genre deaths are dead.”²²⁷ Where journalists and new members of the vaporwave community saw genre death as cause for concern, community veterans saw inaccurate coverage and knowing invocations of a thriving discursive history.

Differing perceptions of genre health peaked in May, when David Russo took public issue with a piece by Tiny Mix Tapes editor Marvin Lin. Writing for the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Lin identified how “not even a year after [vaporwave] first started getting attention, articles were published announcing its death. And [that] somewhere along the way, vaporwave became a punchline.” Lin argued that vaporwave only “died” in the eyes of music journalists, most of whom ignored the music’s participation in a broader tradition of artistic reappropriation. “Part of vaporwave’s supposed ‘death’ has to do with our inability to conceive of it as anything but a microgenre—a ‘thing’ without historical precedent or influence.”²²⁸ Other journalists were frequently unable to conceive of vaporwave as a community, yet those social bonds were perhaps the most important influence of all.

²²⁶ ctwn, “VICE: How Tumblr and MTV Killed the Neon Anti-Corporate Aesthetic of Vaporwave,” *Reddit*, June 27, 2015,

https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/3b9vzo/vice_how_tumblr_and_mtv_killed_the_neon/.

²²⁷ bobtheghost33, “Vaporwave Is Dead,” *Reddit*, February 3, 2015,

https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/2uotgu/vaporwave_is_dead.

²²⁸ Marvin Lin, “Expiring Aesthetics,” Walker Art Center, May 14, 2015,

<https://walkerart.org/magazine/marvin-lin-expiring-aesthetics-new-music>.

Three days later, Russo published a rebuttal on his website that was widely and quickly shared and discussed on the subreddit.²²⁹ Though the original essay has since been deleted, Russo also posted a link to Dream Catalogue's Facebook page, accompanying the post by expressing his frustration with "lazy journalism" and suggesting that Link "[dismissed] vaporwave as a joke." Lin responded to Russo's Facebook post that same day, sparking a long exchange of comments between the two.²³⁰ Russo eventually tempered his frustration while Lin reiterated his intent to critique *press coverage* of vaporwave, not the genre itself. The two were far more similar than not in their appreciation of vaporwave, but the debate distills many of the dissonances surrounding vaporwave. Journalists (other than those like Lin) were stuck in 2012 and unable to observe how, by 2015, a passionate community had developed a genre into something more multifaceted than before.

A Calm Before the Storm

In October, Reddit user oscob asked the vaporwave subreddit how they wanted the genre to develop the following year. Some listeners responded with comments on various stylistic trends, but the majority, encouraged by the previous months of concert organizing, expressed a strong desire for more performances, whether online or off. On the former front, user PS1_ attempted to organize a festival in the vein of SPF420 titled "Boogie at the Hypermall"; and while their efforts failed, PS1_'s reference to *another*

²²⁹ oscob, "Hong Kong Express Responds to Marvin Lin's 'EXPIRING AESTHETICS' Article Claiming That Vaporwave Is Dead," *Reddit*, May 17, 2015, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/368umj/hong_kong_express_responds_to_marvin_lins/.

²³⁰ David Russo, "Dream Catalogue - Facebook," accessed November 1, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/dreamcatalogue/posts/445492572277187?comment_id=445695278923583&offset=0&total_comments=10&comment_tracking=%7B%22tn%22%3A%22R8%22%7D.

aborted festival spoke to the vaporwave community's persistent interest in live performance.²³¹ To that end, oscob themselves referenced offline concerts in their

October post, writing:

I think to bring vaporwave to an "IRL" environment means really bridging the gap between audio and visual. I want to see live vaporwave performance that really up their visuals game, because the visuals (album covers) are so important to the genre itself. That's why I think things more along the lines of art exhibitions are a good direction to go too. We are already seeing that with Dream Catalogue and several of their Virtualife exhibits.²³²

Oscob's mention of Virtualife highlights the significance of that event for the vaporwave community. As David Russo had hoped in February, his event's success demonstrated that it was in fact possible to take vaporwave offline, and others were quick to notice. As early as July, producer Curb Cobain posted about their experience performing at "a small hippie festival" for a confused and occasionally hostile crowd.²³³ And despite persistent rumors of genre death, the vaporwave community's appetite for concerts would continue to grow in the coming years. Unfortunately, that appetite—and the seemingly unified drive towards event organization—would be derailed the following year by a slew of abrasive appropriations, including some from Russo himself.

²³¹ PS1_, "Vaporfest - Summer 2015 (Putting Together a Summer Vaporwave Festival!)," *Reddit*, May 21, 2015, 1, https://www.removeddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/36pyuc/vaporfest_summer_2015_putting_together_a_summer/.

²³² oscob, "Where Do You Want to See Vaporwave Going in 2016?," *Reddit*, October 13, 2015, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/3ol7wz/where_do_you_want_to_see_vaporwave_going_in_2016.

²³³ curbcobain, "Vaporwave Live Show Gone Wrong," *Reddit*, July 19, 2015, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/3dt1uu/vaporwave_live_show_gone_wrong/.

CHAPTER 3: A COMMUNITY FRACTURES

In 2016, the vaporwave community's balance between stylistic diversity and rigid categorization broke. Agitators and outsiders began repurposing the genre for their own ends, straining and "watering down" the existing taxonomy in the eyes of many listeners. Vaporwave's digital nature made it particularly easy to appropriate, too. Unlike in offline genres, people could immediately join community conversations while physically isolated, and anybody could cite vaporwave in a post or a metadata tag—regardless of their prior investment in the genre. The most dangerous genre appropriations came from far-right propagandists, whose creation of "fashwave" and "Trumpwave" repurposed audiovisual elements from vaporwave and related Internet genres. However, a majority of the community rejected these genres, tags, and behaviors. A more benign appropriation came with "Simpsonwave" videos, which paired pre-existing vaporwave tracks with edited clips of the animated TV series *The Simpsons*. Simpsonwave became a popular meme, inviting scores of novel uses of the vaporwave tag and bringing newcomers to discussion forums. While these newcomers championed Simpsonwave on platforms like Reddit, longstanding community members often expressed their skepticism that the trend qualified as a "legitimate" subgenre. Sources of genre instability came from within the community, too. Producer David Russo and other sympathetic artists, disgruntled with listeners' continued fixation on subgenre categories, created "hardvapour": an abrasive spinoff influenced by hardcore dance music and Eastern European aesthetics. According to its proponents, hardvapour aimed to jolt vaporwave listeners out of their rigid approach to musical categorization. For its many detractors, though, hardvapour was both a stylistic non sequitur and, given

hardvapour's trolling, aggressive rhetoric, an abuse of community etiquette.

Fash/Trumpwave, Simpsonwave, and hardvapour all upset vaporwave's status quo, leading many listeners to more strictly adhere to existing taxonomies dictating what was and was not "true" to the genre. These community reactions ushered vaporwave towards the final, Traditionalist stage in Lena's model.

External Threats

During his campaign for the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, Republican candidate Donald Trump promised to "Make America Great Again." After Trump began wearing hats bearing the slogan, the campaign promise quickly became an Internet meme, particularly on sites like Reddit and 4chan.²³⁴ Given vaporwave's prominence in these same spaces, it was only a matter of time before the genre intersected with the meme. One video posted on the vaporwave subreddit featured a Trump impersonator promising to "make vaporwave real again,"²³⁵ while comments following a similar pattern flourished throughout the forum.²³⁶ As with much of Internet meme culture, the sincerity of these comments is open to interpretation. However, at least some commenters made their disdain for Trump clear while noting the campaign's overlap with vaporwave aesthetics. One user summarized this overlap in response to the aforementioned video: "Trump's campaign is based on nostalgia for a vaguely remembered past. His supporters regurgitate endless memes. His words inspire

²³⁴ "Make America Great Again," Know Your Meme, accessed April 5, 2021, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/make-america-great-again>.

²³⁵ *BREAKING: DONALD TRUMPS OUTRAGEOUS CAMPAIGN PROMISE*, accessed April 5, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nSkPbuQ2Z9o>.

²³⁶ "Make Vaporwave Great Again" and "Make Aesthetic Great Again" both appear on this post. "Trump 4 2016," *Reddit*, June 15, 2016, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/4o8syp/trump_4_2016.

emotion but don't *quite* make sense. He's the ultimate 80's businessman, a walking collection of corporatism and superficiality. My god, he's the first vaporwave presidential candidate!"²³⁷ Vaporwave's investment in late-20th century consumerism and nostalgia resonated with a candidate who once created a popular reality TV show and now promised to revive a glorious American past.

Another video post combined Trump and vaporwave-related aesthetics to an even more absurd degree, simultaneously portraying the candidate as an object of fan-like devotion and as a superhuman force responsible for the destruction of Earth. In the clip, a young woman watches television in her bedroom, which is decorated with all sorts of posters and photographs of Trump. Once the TV news program announces that Trump has been elected "world president," the woman enters an imaginary wonderland full of Trump iconography, culminating in her finally embracing the man of her dreams. After their embrace, Trump and the woman enter a giant robot, which flies into space and obliterates the Earth with a giant laser, revealing a "Trump 2016" icon.²³⁸ The video is full of Japanese text and pastel colors—two common aspects of vaporwave's visual style—prompting one user to submit the clip to the genre subreddit. While the post only received a handful of comments, a couple of users pointed out that the video was far more critical of Trump than its tone suggested. Commenters observed that not only did Trump demolish the Earth, but that one building bearing his name featured an inverted pentagram, a symbol commonly associated with Satanism. Most overt of all, a mid-

²³⁷ bobtheghost33, *Reddit*, March 13, 2016, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/4aazcf/donald_trump_promises_to_make_vaporwave_real_in/d0yxumd/?utm_source=reddit&utm_medium=web2x&context=3.

²³⁸ Mike Diva, *Japanese Donald Trump Commercial トランプ2016*, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZbM6WbUw7Bs>.

video montage includes a brief clip of the Trump stand-in performing a Hitler salute in front of three Nazi swastikas—a clear condemnation of the candidate. And yet in such a mock-celebratory context, it's entirely possible to envision a viewer taking the video's adoration seriously; as one commenter wrote, "It's supposed to be anti-trump but it's so goddamn glorious that it seems pro-trump."²³⁹

This video's ambiguity epitomized vaporwave's ethos, where invocations of the past could be ironic or sincere depending on both artist and listener. This stance was already present at the genre's formation, and after the rise of future funk's more uncomplicated nostalgia, vaporwave's tone was more open-ended than ever. In a political context, though, this ambiguity left the genre vulnerable to appropriation by white supremacists emboldened by Trump's candidacy. An early example of this combination of vaporwave and far-right politics first appeared in February 2016 as a joke on Canadian satire site Rave News. The anonymous satirist wrote that vaporwave producers were upset by the genre's influx of neo-Nazis; according to fictional producer DJ Karoda Nite, "music should be about bringing people together, not about establishing a 4th Reich under God Emperor Trump, lord of the Americas, or whatever the fuck it is that fascists are trying to do."²⁴⁰ While the ideological thrust of this article and others on Rave News are unclear, a subset of readers clearly endorsed the appropriation, as evidenced by multiple well-received comments repeating neo-Nazi

²³⁹ cj35001, *Reddit*, June 15, 2016, 3, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/4o8syp/trump_4_2016/d4ayyz0/?utm_source=reddit&utm_medium=web2x&context=3.

²⁴⁰ Anonymous, "Vaporwave Artists Mad That Their Music Is Popular With Fascists," Rave News, February 9, 2016, <http://www.ravenews.ca/en/read/2016/february/09/>.

talking points. Whether Rave News inadvertently reflected or inspired an actual trend, the article's subject matter became far more real over the coming months.

In January 2017, journalists Penn Bullock and Eli Kerry published an article on “Trumpwave” and “fashwave”: far-right incarnations of vaporwave and related genres. Bullock and Kerry noted that Trumpwave was distinct from other concurrent forms of fascist electronic music (like fashwave) in its prevailing focus on vaporwave, recasting Donald Trump as “the modern-day inheritor of the mythologized 80s, a decade that is taken to stand for racial purity and unleashed capitalism.” Bullock and Kerry admitted that Trumpwave was only the latest example in a long history of the fascist appropriation of music genres, ranging from punk and folk to industrial and noise. However, they suggested that vaporwave's relationship to its source material left the genre particularly vulnerable to such co-optation.

Trumpwave exploits a vulnerability in vaporwave: its ambivalence about the cultural detritus that inspired it. This careful tension between irony and earnestness was part of what made vaporwave fun—it flirted with the implicit transgressiveness of appreciating its aggressively commercial source material. But that ambiguity left the aesthetic distressingly easy for the alt-right to appropriate by stripping it of irony and playfulness—by taking it literally, as a glorification of capitalism.²⁴¹

While some members of the vaporwave community enjoyed ironic Trump memes before the election, that appetite diminished in the face of Trump's presidency and an ascendant far-right. One post containing an animated GIF of Trump drinking Fiji water (a mainstay of vaporwave memes) was harshly downvoted, with the highest-rated

²⁴¹ Penn Bullock and Eli Kerry, “Trumpwave and Fashwave Are Just the Latest Disturbing Examples of the Far-Right Appropriating Electronic Music,” Noisey, January 30, 2017, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/mgwk7b/trumpwave-fashwave-far-right-appropriation-vaporwave-synthwave.

comments expressing outright revulsion.²⁴² And when one user posted the aforementioned Noisey article, the vast majority of commenters were disgusted by neo-Nazis and their use of vaporwave aesthetics. A commenter even noted the irony that a political ideology as transphobic as fascism would embrace a genre created in large part by Ramona Xavier, a trans woman.²⁴³

On rare occasions, the vaporwave subreddit even began moving towards political activism. In late January, a user solicited submissions for Canadian netlabel Lost Angles, who planned to release a benefit compilation for Indivisible, a progressive political advocacy group, and the American Civil Liberties Union. The announcement was quite popular, receiving a slew of positive responses. However, the post also received a number of hostile “troll” commenters repeating anti-Semitic conspiracy theories and fascist talking points, though all of these comments were heavily downvoted by the forum’s userbase.²⁴⁴

Frustration with racist, far-right appropriation of vaporwave reached another visible peak with the Twitter hashtag “takebackvaporwave.” Casually tweeted by the producer George Clanton, the hashtag spread more quickly than Clanton anticipated; and while the original tweet has since been deleted, making historical specifics difficult to find, the hashtag gained enough traction for Reddit users to begin asking about it on

²⁴² [deleted], “Does Trump Know? Is He A E S T H E T I C?,” *Reddit*, November 17, 2017, https://www.removeddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/7dlugu/does_trump_know_is_he_a_e_s_t_h_e_t_i_c/.

²⁴³ vaporfundsltd, “Fashwave Is Just the Latest Disturbing Examples of the Far-Right Appropriating Electronic Music | Thump (Includes Quote from Vektroid),” *Reddit*, January 30, 2017, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/5r52a5/fashwave_is_just_the_latest_disturbing_examples/.

²⁴⁴ vaporfundsltd, “[OPEN SUBMISSIONS] Benefit Vaporwave Compilation for the ACLU / Indivisible Guide (via Lost Angles),” *Reddit*, January 29, 2017, https://www.removeddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/5qyljz/open_submissions_benefit_vaporwave_compilation.

the vaporwave subreddit. Clanton offered a lengthy explanation, clarifying that he was venting his frustrations rather than attempting to create any sort of movement. In short, Clanton was “getting uncomfortable with being associated with vaporwave after noticing a trend of nastiness in the scene. I wanted to publicly let the world know that I don't subscribe to those ideals. I don't fuck with your ‘edgy jokes.’”²⁴⁵ Clanton's frustration became increasingly emblematic of the subreddit's mood, with more listeners tiring of ironic (let alone sincere) invocations of Trump and fascism.

An association between vaporwave and far-right politics soon filtered beyond the genre's immediate community, with some of Reddit's broader userbase asking the vaporwave subreddit about the connection. One poster asked how the far-right was able to co-opt vaporwave when the genre's roots were supposedly anti-capitalist, and while some responses questioned the degree to which far-right propagandists were actually interested in vaporwave beyond racist and anti-Semitic memes, others reflected on the social and demographic similarities between members of the two communities.

A lot of the early activity leading to the popularity of vaporwave was centered around 4chan which, around that time, was shifting from being "chaotic neutral" to being wholly subsumed by...alt-right thinking. Turns out, it's pretty easy to fool NEETs [people Not in Education, Employment or Training] into thinking they're the shit...So, if we're not political *per-se*, why do we line up so well with the alt-right? I believe it simply has to do with how vaporwave arose from a similar demographic to the one that popularized the alt-right online...Basically, if you're young (16-25), likely a suburban white kid, fairly intelligent, and spend a shit ton of time online, you probably know what vaporwave is, and you've probably been more exposed to alt-right thinking than someone outside that demo.²⁴⁶

²⁴⁵ George Clanton, *Reddit*, July 9, 2017, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/6m53uy/can_someone_explain_the_whole_takebackvaporwave/djz5j5l/?utm_source=reddit&utm_medium=web2x&context=3.

²⁴⁶ ohnonothing, *Reddit*, June 24, 2017, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/6ja9fh/why_are_so_many_vaporwave_fans_altright/djcsmb0/?utm_source=reddit&utm_medium=web2x&context=3.

Critic Scott Beauchamp echoed this argument in an April piece, albeit from a perspective more overtly critical of vaporwave. According to Beauchamp, “[vaporwave’s] ambiguity was cultivated in a figurative isolation...[it] was the first musical genre to live its entire life from birth to death completely online...[so] it’s only fitting that the soundtrack to nostalgic anomie was created by and for people alone on their computers at 3:00 in the morning—the secret lives of sad young Americans mediated by routers and laptop screens.” This disconnection is hardly unique to vaporwave; “it’s the exact same isolated petri dish that the alt-right was grown in,” and this digital proximity combined with vaporwave’s political ambiguity to facilitate the genre’s eventual appropriation.²⁴⁷

Where far-right propagandists appropriated vaporwave to pernicious ends, others did so to far more benign ends with their creation of “Simpsonwave” videos. Since late 2015 people had been combining pre-existing vaporwave tracks with edited clips of the animated television show *The Simpsons*. For example, “S U N D A Y S C H O O L” paired producer BLANK BANSHEE’s popular track “Teen Pregnancy” with various scenes of schoolage Bart’s antics. The clips contain numerous glitches and artifacts reminiscent of degraded VHS tapes, and the entire color palette has been filtered to a muted set of purples and blues.²⁴⁸ Though the video isn’t quite depressing, the colors and pitched-down vocal sample repeating “I’m just a kid” create a melancholy undercurrent common to much Simpsonwave.

²⁴⁷ Scott Beauchamp, “Attention Online Shoppers...,” *The Brooklyn Rail*, April 2017, <https://brooklynrail.org/2017/04/music/Attention-Online-Shoppers>.

²⁴⁸ Lucien Hughes, “S U N D A Y S C H O O L,” YouTube, February 29, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rTfa-9aCTYg>.

By summer 2016, Simpsonwave had grown popular enough as a meme outside vaporwave circles for major press outlets to begin covering the trend. Journalist Krystal Rodriguez published one of the first profiles for Noisey in June, grappling with the question of whether Simpsonwave qualified as the latest micro-genre in a decade full of them. She never reached a definitive answer, but she admitted that Simpsonwave was, at the very least, “very cool”.²⁴⁹ This positive reception of Simpsonwave marked a notable contrast with Noisey’s prior, more condescending coverage of vaporwave, though it’s unclear whether this was due to an editorial shift, a simple difference in authors’ opinions, or the presence of a widely-acclaimed TV show.

Other outlets turned their attention to Simpsonwave at the same time. One day after Rodriguez’s piece, The AV Club published their own profile of what they termed a meme and a genre of YouTube videos (not necessarily a *music* genre). The author suggested that Simpsonwave videos might have some deeper emotional significance, though he never offered further information on what that might entail. His article also revealed some familiar misunderstandings of vaporwave, arguing that the genre uses the sounds of past decades to mock popular music.²⁵⁰ As in previous years, vaporwave’s association with pure irony completely defined the genre for some journalists, even though the community had become far more diverse in its perspectives.

²⁴⁹ Krystal Rodriguez, “Is Simpsonwave a Real Thing?,” Noisey, June 2, 2016, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/kb53g9/simpsonwave-vaporwave-meme.

²⁵⁰ Joe Blevins, “‘Simpsonwave’ Is the Most Wack, Tripped-out Simpsons Meme Ever,” The AV Club, June 3, 2016, <https://news.avclub.com/simpsonwave-is-the-most-wack-tripped-out-simpsons-me-1798247913>.

A few days after the Noisey and AV Club articles, culture critic Sandra Song surveyed Simpsonwave by interviewing one of its chief exponents, Lucien Hughes. While Hughes claimed that he likely coined the term Simpsonwave, he identified producers “Spicter” and “midge” as the first to combine Simpsons footage with vaporwave. In October 2015, “Spicter” uploaded a simple loop to the now-defunct video platform Vine, while “midge” began uploading more heavily-edited montages to YouTube in early 2016. These reference points became popular in a Facebook group named “Simpsons Shitposting,” and in keeping with that name, Hughes began making videos in the group as a simple joke among friends. However, as Hughes began putting more effort into his productions (including “S U N D A Y S C H O O L”), he began taking Simpsonwave more seriously, appreciating how the audiovisual pairing “seem[ed] to strike a chord with others in the same way it [did] for [him].”²⁵¹ Unfortunately, Hughes never offered details on what this emotional chord might be.

Hughes elaborated further on Simpsonwave in an interview with Pitchfork published the following week, where he noted that he was actually an *administrator* for the “Simpsons Shitposting” group, where “we try to keep the humor relatively abstract and obscure rather than needlessly edgy, 4chan-style shitposting.”²⁵² A denial of “edginess” informs the fundamental earnestness of Simpsonwave, which Hughes again invokes by referencing the ambiguous “chord” that “Spicter”’s video struck within him. This emotional chord received its most extensive definition in a July piece published by

²⁵¹ Sandra Song, “What Is Simpsonwave? A Brief Introduction Via the Microgenre’s Lucien Hughes,” Paper, June 6, 2016, <https://www.papermag.com/what-is-simpsonwave-a-brief-introduction-via-scene-staple-lucien-hughe-1843964229.html>.

²⁵² Kevin Lozano, “What the Hell Is Simpsonwave?,” Pitchfork, June 14, 2016, <https://pitchfork.com/thepitch/1188-what-the-hell-is-simpsonwave/>.

UK youth culture site The Tab. Kurt Robson wrote with breathless enthusiasm for Simpsonwave and its ability to conjure a sense of “familiarity, [with] no danger of finding anything new or unrecognisable. You’re in a territory where you feel safe and comfortable.”²⁵³ And later that month, arts journalist Genista Jurgens touched on similar themes, arguing that vaporwave represented a broader rejection of “the irony and nihilism of postmodernism.” For Jurgens, Simpsonwave marked the latest instance of this trend by prizing “honesty, sincerity and emotional connection.”²⁵⁴ Given how many vaporwave listeners embraced vaporwave in an earnest manner, Jurgens’ observations were perceptive.

Simpsonwave videos were quite popular on the vaporwave subreddit, but in contrast with the uniformly positive press coverage, some subscribers were less effusive. After a few months of users posting videos in the vein of the original Simpsonwave clips, the forum’s first discussion posts on the topic revealed misgivings about referring to the trend as a new *genre*. Some users speculated that the issue stemmed in part from the use of the “wave” suffix, a common genre-naming convention indebted to the late 1970s term “new wave.”²⁵⁵ Others argued that the videos were a shallow misrepresentation of vaporwave:

a petty fad that has no effort put into [it]. It's just old chopped up Simpsons videos with a purple VHS filter playing (or looping) over existing vaporwave tracks. It focuses on A E S T H E T I C S rather than the music itself (which may not even be vaporwave, sometimes it's synthwave), further perpetuating the idea that vaporwave is a meme. The videos themselves have little to no context except

²⁵³ Kurt Robson, “We Spoke to the Creator of Simpsonwave, and It’s about to End,” The Tab, July 7, 2016, <https://thetab.com/uk/2016/07/07/spoke-creator-simpsonwave-end-6587>.

²⁵⁴ Genista Jurgens, “Why Won’t Vaporwave Die?,” Format, July 29, 2016, <https://www.format.com/magazine/features/art/vaporwave>.

²⁵⁵ dragonsky, “Is Simpsonswave Just a Vaporwave Songs with Simpsons Episodes Edited in as a Video for the Songs?,” *Reddit*, May 26, 2016, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/4l8t8c/is_simpsonswave_just_a_vaporwave_songs_with/.

that they "look cool/retro", this undermines the tracks used and the albums behind them.²⁵⁶

The monospace spelling of "aesthetic" (or any other word/phrase, like "Sunday School") had become a meme in the community—a shorthand way of signaling subcultural membership. Like any meme, though, community newcomers could invoke this spelling regardless of their investment in vaporwave, and this degree of open access rankled some, particularly since Simpsonwave videos regularly received far more attention on the subreddit than links to new vaporwave releases. This disconnect touched a longstanding nerve with many forum regulars, who complained that memes in general had become more popular than original content. On a post linking to the aforementioned Pitchfork article and asking if Simpsonwave had now "jumped the shark," one user bitterly commented "oh so now that Pitchfork latches on to it no one upvotes Simpsonwave when it has been all the rage here for months at the expense of many great releases." Others concurred, describing the subreddit as "[an] absolute shithole for discussing the music" given the glut of Simpsonwave and meme posts "littering the top of the sub."²⁵⁷

For these critics, vaporwave had become too popular. Since anybody could easily appropriate memes or terms associated with the genre, its perceived integrity was too easily diluted by outsiders with little investment in its community or history. To be sure, the outrage over fascist vaporwave dwarfed the frustrations with Simpsonwave,

²⁵⁶ nuvpr, *Reddit*, July 17, 2016, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/4tb6r2/opinions_on_simpsonwave/d5g110k/?utm_source=reddit&utm_medium=web2x&context=3.

²⁵⁷ "Has S I M P S O N W A V E Jumped the Shark? Now Pitchfork Is Commenting on It," *Reddit*, June 14, 2016, https://www.removeddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/4o2ify/has_s_i_m_p_s_o_n_w_a_v_e_jumped_the_shark_now/.

but both spoke to a growing feeling of being imperiled by external threats. The ensuing boundary-work—delineating what vaporwave was and was not—fit Jennifer Lena’s profile of a Scene-based genre, but fash- and Simpsonwave weren’t the only threats to genre cohesion. One just as disruptive came from *within* the community, from a member who had done more for the genre than almost anybody else.

Hardvapour

In the final weeks of 2015, Dream Catalogue began releasing albums that stretched vaporwave’s stylistic diversity to new extremes. First, the label issued *End of World Rave* by Montreal producer Matthew Lupovich (working under the alias wasX) in late November; then, David Russo himself (working under the alias Sandtimer) released *Vaporwave Is Dead* the following month. For all of vaporwave’s stylistic diversity, the genre had rarely been as willfully harsh as on these releases. “Welcome to Hardvapour” was particularly confrontational: a booming, noisy kick drum undergirds wailing lead synths and samples of a man yelling. More than any of vaporwave’s previous influences, the track evokes “gabber”: a style of hardcore dance music that emerged from the Netherlands in the 1990s.

These albums marked the emergence of “hardvapour”: a subgenre that Russo himself christened on *Vaporwave Is Dead*. On the spoken interlude “A Message From Flash Kostovich,” a man (presumably Russo) announces that “vaporwave has finally died. It is the music that only the pussies will listen to. And from now, it will only just be the hardvapour.”²⁵⁸ Hostility and vulgarity would quickly become hallmarks of

²⁵⁸ Sandtimer, *A Message From Flash Kostovich*, Digital (Dream Catalogue, 2015), <https://dreamcatalogue.bandcamp.com/track/a-message-from-flash-kostovich>.

hardvapour, and that aggression may have contributed to many listeners' irritation. Less than a month after *Vaporwave Is Dead*, one Reddit user referred to hardvapour as "easily the worst subgenre of vaporwave," and many commenters concurred.²⁵⁹ However, one user viewed the album as an intentional provocation on the heels of the year's debates on stylistic plurality: "It also has the added impact of masking this year's criticism of vaporambient, because this is so clearly and intentionally afiel of Vaporwave proper. It's a cheeky middle finger to those of us who take genre boundaries seriously, and it's a reminder for us to approach music with playfulness."²⁶⁰ Criticisms of "vaporambient" were especially familiar to Russo, since his album *2814* popularized the style. And judging by his confrontations with journalist Marvin Lin, the criticisms bothered him a good deal, likely informing his provocations.

The vaporwave community's boundary work in 2016 addressed more than outside appropriation. David Russo and others' creation of hardvapour, coupled with their overt antagonism towards the vaporwave scene, triggered months of outrage. Like future funk, hardvapour's position within vaporwave was hotly contested; unlike future funk, hardvapour never gained mass acceptance as a subgenre. Instead the community's broader rejection of hardvapour placed the offshoot in a peripheral purgatory—legible as a stylistic descriptor but unwelcome within the genre scene. For the first time, the vaporwave community's stylistic plurality reached its limits, overtaken by a longstanding drive to categorize. The hardvapour backlash ushered the scene

²⁵⁹ floflo79, "Hardvapour Is Easily the Worst Subgenre of Vaporwave," *Reddit*, December 20, 2015, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/3xm21q/hardvapour_is_easily_the_worst_subgenre_of.

²⁶⁰ ohnonothing, *Reddit*, December 21, 2015, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/3xm21q/hardvapour_is_easily_the_worst_subgenre_of/cy6an4k/?utm_source=reddit&utm_medium=web2x&context=3.

towards the Traditionalist stage of Lena's model, where boundary work is targeted "against deviants within" a community.²⁶¹

Boundary work against hardvapour was already in effect at the start of 2016, thanks in part to the rhetoric of its most visible proponents. On a January post asking "wtf is this hardvapour shit," most commenters responded with similar irritation, dismissing the style as a pointless, contrarian joke.²⁶² Leading hardvapour label Antifur continued to cultivate that reputation, too, posting spam-like messages in all caps with crude titles like "HARDVAPOUR IS BETTER THAN ANY SHIT THAT YOU FAGGOTS HAVE EVER MADE."²⁶³ Subreddit moderators, possibly acting out of frustration, responded by exacerbating the issue further. When one user posted a Ukranian video meme with subtitles mocking hardvapour producers as "maladjusted children," moderator angrypoto1 "stickied" the thread "to feed drama," automatically placing it at the top of the subreddit's current list of posts. Elsewhere in the same thread, angrypoto1 posted a screenshot of 22 usernames banned from r/vaporwave, nearly half of which were alternate accounts of Antifur founder Matthew Lupovich (best-known under the alias wosX).²⁶⁴ And when an Antifur sister label promoted one of their albums in May with a post titled "RIP Hardvapour," a member of the moderating team "stickied" the submission as well, presumably in approval of the titular sentiment.²⁶⁵ Commenters

²⁶¹ Lena, *Banding Together*, 18.

²⁶² Shima33, "Wtf Is This Hardvapour Shit," *Reddit*, January 26, 2016, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/42rb1a/wtf_is_this_hardvapour_shit.

²⁶³ antifur2, "HARDVAPOUR IS BETTER THAN ANY SHIT THAT YOU FAGGOTS HAVE MADE EVER," *Reddit*, January 27, 2016, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/4305ko/hardvapour_is_better_than_any_shit_that_you.

²⁶⁴ imnotaroboto78, "Hardvapour: A Documentary," *Reddit*, April 18, 2016, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/4fc3wn/hardvapour_a_documentary/.

²⁶⁵ VaporFur, "RIP Hardvapour," *Reddit*, May 2, 2016, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/4hh3es/rip_hardvapour.

were far less amused by the moderator's decision, expressing an exhaustion with the topic that had been building for months.

As early as March, a subset of listeners had become so weary of hardvapour controversies that they even expressed irritation with others complaining about the topic. After one person posted that they were “fucking tired of people like fucking wosX and HKE. they need to learn there place in the community and stop trying to force there fucking ideology down our god damn throats,” multiple commenters suggested that the community needed to move on. Or as one user pithily stated, “calm down babe.”²⁶⁶ Even Ramona Xavier grew tired of hearing about the style, posting on Twitter that “[the] next person who tries to make me care about hardvapour gets blocked.”²⁶⁷

On the other hand, some listeners saw the hardvapour backlash as less about style than Lupovich's inflammatory rhetoric—that “there would be no hardvapour beef if it wasn't for all this dumb promotional stuff.”²⁶⁸ Others concurred, suggesting that some hardvapour releases were legitimately interesting. “Much in the same way as vaporwave itself, it quickly went beyond [being tongue-in-cheek] and became people being genuine about the music. If you've heard any of the stuff that telepath is tagging as hardvapour on [Soundcloud] then you'll know it's got more to it than just a joke or a meme.”²⁶⁹ But in light of what some users perceived as a mob mentality, one posted that “any wosX or HKE related post on here is downvoted and hated...regardless of the

²⁶⁶ CAPSICOLA, “Hardvapour, and Its Ostentatious Virtues. : /,” *Reddit*, March 24, 2016, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/4buymz/hardvapour_and_its_ostentatious_virtues.

²⁶⁷ MrSelfDestruct, “Vektroid Weighs in on Hardvapour,” *Reddit*, April 28, 2016, https://www.removeddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/4gw8di/vektroid_weighs_in_on_hardvapour/.

²⁶⁸ virtuastep, *Reddit*, April 28, 2016, https://www.removeddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/4gw8di/_/d2ley5z/.

²⁶⁹ intIdebris, *Reddit*, March 5, 2016, https://www.removeddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/491aog/_/d0olmmc/.

quality of content that's posted. I can guarantee half of the people ranting about hardvapour and the like can't give an actual reason as to why they're against it, just cause everyone does so they must fall in line."²⁷⁰ Then again, multiple commenters suspected this complaint came from one of Lupovich's aliases, further illustrating how charged a subject hardvapour was by May. Just as much as (or even more than) any stylistic transgressions, abusive rhetoric and bad-faith shitposting led to the community's rejection of hardvapour as incompatible with vaporwave.

While listeners on the vaporwave subreddit debated hardvapour's place within their community, music journalists seized the opportunity for another round of headlines. Most hardvapour articles, like many early vaporwave pieces, interpreted the style as political commentary, often interviewing Matthew Lupovich on his label's purported aims. In October, Bandcamp columnist Simon Chandler published a now-deleted interview with Lupovich, where the Antifur founder donned the Ukranian alias Vladyk Predovitch. Lupovich repeatedly emphasized the need for "hard" music—a concept surely tied to hardvapour's foundational speed and abrasion, but also a nebulous placeholder for authenticity and political reality:

There is nothing wrong with the actual music of vaporwave. The problem though from the genre comes from the fact that it is all meaningless irony. We have sunk into this deep virtual plaza and have made a prison for ourselves made of softness. But this is not how the world is. If we want to change the world for better, we cannot escape into little fantasy world forever. Sometimes we must face the truth, and only the hard truth.²⁷¹

²⁷⁰ vwadder223, "R/Vaporwave and the Mob Mentality," *Reddit*, May 6, 2016, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/4i8k8q/rvaporwave_and_the_mob_mentality.

²⁷¹ Simon Chandler, "Antifur Want to Shake Vaporwave Out of Its Meaningless Irony," Bandcamp, October 21, 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20161022163352/https://daily.bandcamp.com/2016/10/21/antifur-vaporwave-interview/>.

Lupovich never offered a concrete definition of “hardness”, but the concept recurred throughout coverage of Antifur and hardvapour as a proposed, if vague, antidote for vaporwave’s purportedly ineffectual politics. Before his Antifur profile, Simon Chandler referenced hardvapour in a broader, also deleted, discussion of vaporwave’s politics, suggesting that “hardness” was the label’s way of “showing vaporwave how wholly inappropriate and irresponsible it is to deploy its characteristic irony in such a fraught and dangerous world as ours.”²⁷² (Yet again, many journalists still viewed vaporwave as a necessarily ironic genre.) And in an April article on culture site Dazed, Dream Catalogue founder and Lupovich collaborator David Russo told a journalist that “if vaporwave is painting alternate utopian realities through sound, vision and concept, then hardvapour is the antithesis to that, the hard parallel.”²⁷³ With “an iconography that invokes cybercrime, urban decay, chemical warfare, workplace exploitation, the sex industry, and even Islamic terrorism,” hardvapour relished in dystopia.²⁷⁴

Hardvapour’s provocations failed to “kill” vaporwave. After *Vaporwave Is Dead* and *End of World Rave*, a cadre of enthusiasts gathered around Antifur and other new labels, most notably H.V.R.F. (Hard Vapour Resistance Front) Central Command, but the broader vaporwave community moved on. A mere year after the style’s arrival, commenters were already referring to hardvapour in the past tense,²⁷⁵ and in a late 2017 post asking if hardvapour ever “caught on,” commenters were emphatic (and

²⁷² Simon Chandler, “Music of the Spectacle: Alienation, Irony and the Politics of Vaporwave,” Bandcamp, August 23, 2016.

²⁷³ Matt Broomfield, “Inside ‘hardvapour’, the Internet’s Latest Microgenre,” Dazed, April 28, 2016, <https://www.dazeddigital.com/music/article/30896/1/inside-harvapour-the-internet-s-latest-microgenre>.

²⁷⁴ Chandler, “Music of the Spectacle.”

²⁷⁵ an_altar_of_plagues, *Reddit*, November 14, 2016, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/5cy23v/hardvapour_seemed_to_be_a_kneejerk_reaction_to/da0s44t.

sometimes snide) in their dismissals. According to one Reddit user, “vaporwave listeners want[ed] something different from boring rave music that is the musical equivalent of burger king.”²⁷⁶ Elsewhere, reflecting on hardvapour’s historical importance, another listener offered a more charitable interpretation:

It all sorta started late very 2015 when Dream Catalogue still had a heavy influence on the community...at the time, late 2015, everyone was doing the same thing, ripping off jams and styles of what people have done before etc, but once these albums came out late 2015, 2016 was a big year for hardvapor inspired music to come out...Aesthetically [hardvapour] was refreshing too the art wasn't the same ol' Asian babe over grainy filter or city scape over musky fog. Some of the hardvapor art really inspired makers to be weird and really go against the preconceived "formula" they all think they should follow.²⁷⁷

From this perspective, hardvapour was less a failed attempt to ruin vaporwave and more a bracing rejoinder to the genre’s creative stasis. Such an interpretation likely squares with David Russo’s perspective at the time, though his public statements rarely put it so diplomatically.

Through this period, Russo garnered a reputation as a vaporwave producer and label operator who hated vaporwave. His central role in hardvapour—creating *Vaporwave Is Dead* under a short-lived alias, releasing *End of World Rave* on Dream Catalogue, using “hardness” rhetoric in press interviews—made some listeners predisposed to dislike Russo. But Russo became even more brazen in 2016, outwardly mocking the vaporwave community for what he perceived as its narrow-mindedness and lack of creativity. In a series of Facebook posts, he championed the superiority of “hard” over “soft” vapour, listing his reasons for despising the latter. According to Russo,

²⁷⁶ power_lunch, *Reddit*, October 23, 2017, https://www.removeddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/784m9k/_/dormvq5/.

²⁷⁷ I _ I --, *Reddit*, June 22, 2017, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/6iv5hx/can_someone_explain_me_the_hardvapour_rant/dj9d52u.

“softvapor” was “full of uncreative people who can’t make original music for the most part,” while a majority of producers were “highly judgemental [sic], mean-spirited and act like cult members.” Russo then named multiple artists who fit his prior description and ended by stating that he no longer considered Dream Catalogue a vaporwave label.²⁷⁸ This was a monumental turn, since Russo had previously championed vaporwave with his event organizing and public responses to journalist Marvin Lin. Now, the vaporwave community’s continual debates over genre boundaries having worn him down, Russo rejected the genre he once claimed.

Shortly after these posts, someone posted screenshots of Russo’s comments to the vaporwave subreddit, prompting a flurry of comments and debates over just how much these manifestos mattered.²⁷⁹ Some users bemoaned the present state of Dream Catalogue, some expressed frustration at how much attention the community kept giving Russo, and others urged restraint in responding to posts written while drunk. One commenter claimed to be Russo’s friend, cautioning that “he clearly has an issue with alcohol, and that this is probably where the behavior is coming from. He is a very wonderful man, and does not deserve to be dissected publicly like this. Just leave it to him and his artists to sort out.”²⁸⁰ Despite this suggestion, commenters continued to stew over Russo’s ongoing provocations, such as a later tweet describing vaporwave as “more similar to bronzies [oft-derided adult fans of the children’s television show *My Little*

²⁷⁸ David Russo, *Facebook*, March 4, 2016, <https://imgur.com/QvmwltB>.

²⁷⁹ While the original images have been deleted since posting, Reddit user thejogisurp posted backup screenshots in a series of comments on the same thread. thejogisurp, “David Russo’s Drunken Rampage (The Owner of Dream Catalogue),” *Reddit*, March 4, 2016, https://www.removeddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/48wgjw/david_russos_drunken_rampage_the_owner_of_dream/.

²⁸⁰ LJohnHubbard, *Reddit*, March 4, 2016, https://www.removeddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/48wgjw/_/d0nmriw/.

Pony: Friendship Is Magic] than a music genre.” Though by this point, many Reddit users were exasperated by anything related to Russo, pointing out that “he does this stuff because its [sic] so easy to piss everyone off” and “by posting this here you're just letting him think that anyone gives a fuck.”²⁸¹

Russo’s erratic behavior extended well beyond social media activity, though; in March, one vaporwave listener noticed that Russo surreptitiously deleted eleven albums from Dream Catalogue’s Bandcamp page. That listener posted their discovery on r/vaporwave, imploring readers to stop buying anything from Dream Catalogue and “let [Russo] fade alone.” As usual, community members were quick to offer their opinions. While a few viewed the issue as trivial, most commenters were upset by the catalog removals and lack of communication from the label. Others were more interested in the reason for the deletions, be it uncleared samples or Russo’s ongoing disdain for “soft” and otherwise creatively bankrupt vaporwave. Russo himself offered little clarification, responding to the post with a link to a video of professional wrestlers spelling the word “sawft,” echoing the hardvapour rhetoric of the preceding months. Finally, producer SEPHORA脳バイブス noted that Russo altered the names of musicians and album titles—including their own—without artists’ permission.²⁸²

While it’s difficult to determine whether he made earlier statements on the matter, David Russo didn’t address the Dream Catalogue deletions on Reddit until nearly a month later—a gap of time that further fueled his critics’ suspicions of bad faith. When

²⁸¹ shmn_01, “HKE Calls Vaporwave ‘more Similar to Bronies than a Music Genre,’” *Reddit*, April 17, 2016, https://www.removeddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/4f94sl/hke_calls_vaporwave_more_similar_to_bronies_than/.

²⁸² [deleted], “The Shittiness of HKE,” *Reddit*, March 23, 2016, https://www.removeddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/4bn78n/the_shittiness_of_hke/.

Russo finally did post an explanation, he thanked his supporters, defended himself against accusations of ill intent, and cryptically confirmed that “I did not delete the albums from Dream Catalogue for no reason, but I can't fully explain right now.”²⁸³ Amid the usual range of community responses, a number of listeners expressed the sense of betrayal at the heart of the ongoing drama. One summarized the entire situation best:

DC's early growth and continued success can be attributed to diehard Vaporwave fans, like myself, and you owe a lot of that to the people who have steadily supported DC since the beginning. A lot of us never had the cataclysmic change of taste that you did near the end of 2015, and so we are left here wondering why one of the biggest names in Vaporwave, and one of the truest advocates of the genre:

- Is dropping artists from the roster based on interpersonal conflict.
- Continually calls us "soft cunts".
- Compares Vaporwave culture to Brony culture.
- Has public spats with artists he wholeheartedly backed only 1-2 months earlier.
- Takes other subtle actions by which Occam's Razor indicates a total distaste for the genre and a desire to ablate all affiliation.

Still wonder why people are so fucked over this?²⁸⁴

Russo would later claim that the catalog deletions were indeed a response to legal threats,²⁸⁵ but the damage was already done. For many on the vaporwave subreddit, Russo had become a nuisance, a tiresome source of endless drama and petty infighting. Dream Catalogue continued to release music but had lost their status as vaporwave's central organizing institution, with Russo aiding this separation by re-branding the label as an outlet for “dreampunk” (another genre term from niche online communities).

²⁸³ David Russo, “As Much as I Can Explain for Now,” *Reddit*, April 19, 2016, https://www.removeddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/4fh2mz/as_much_as_i_can_explain_for_now/.

²⁸⁴ IlluminaTides, *Reddit*, April 19, 2016, https://www.removeddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/4fh2mz/_/d298jao/.

²⁸⁵ David Russo, “In Regards to Situation with Vaperror and the Criticism That Has Followed,” *HKE* (blog), February 17, 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170218124308/https://hkedream.com/2017/02/17/in-regards-to-situation-with-vaperror-and-the-criticism-that-has-followed/>.

After a year of external and internal disruptions, many in the vaporwave community were ready for a return to normalcy. Their genre had been appropriated by fascists, spotlighted by popular memes, and attacked by a former luminary—all of which threatened the perceived integrity of vaporwave and its community. These events accelerated a shift to Lena’s Traditionalist stage, where listeners were ever more invested in preserving stylistic categories and defending genre purity from internal threats.

Folksonomy

As the vaporwave community became more traditionalist after a tumultuous year, the scene’s robust system of subgenres also grew more fixed. Throughout its existence, the vaporwave community was deeply invested in identifying and tagging distinct swaths of the broader genre spectrum. By the end of 2016 this system had solidified into a “folksonomy”: a taxonomy born of user-created tags.²⁸⁶ This folksonomy aligns with Lena’s description of how in Traditionalist genres scholarly literature “strives to...codify and organize the field.”²⁸⁷ Absent academic coverage of vaporwave, listeners pursued the same goals. As always, the vaporwave community maintained an uneasy balance between sonic diversity and taxonomic rigor; after 2016, the latter tendency overtook the former.

The vaporwave folksonomy represented a paradox. Listeners created an intricate system of subgenres with which to categorize releases, yet many were equally comfortable with a loose, open-ended definition of vaporwave on a broad scale. As one

²⁸⁶ Vander Wal, “Folksonomy Coinage and Definition.”

²⁸⁷ Lena, *Banding Together*, 46.

person put it: “There are so many subgenres and styles because a clear, definite, finite definition does not currently exist...The moment a definition is created that is sound we put a box around Vaporwave.”²⁸⁸ From this perspective, subgenre definitions were far more useful and accurate than any overarching definition of vaporwave. As in the past, many Reddit users defined the genre more by its subject matter and emotional effects—time, memory, childhood, and the like.²⁸⁹ And in another thread, one listener described vaporwave as “almost a catch-all for any art that’s conscious of the ephemerality of the internet/technology and the individual’s place in the world going forward.”²⁹⁰ After all, by 2017 sample-free vaporwave was common enough to constitute an entire wing of the genre alongside more traditional forms built from edits of pre-existing songs. Some of the genre’s most popular artists and labels like ESPRIT 空想 and Dream Catalogue used few samples if any, and as one user observed, neither did many of the subreddit’s favorite albums of 2016 including bl00dwave’s *Distance* and Equip’s *I Dreamed of a Palace in the Sky*.²⁹¹

These discussions reveal listeners’ growing comfort with a pluralistic definition of vaporwave, one more dependent on community reception and thematic content than on musical style. However, this open-ended approach to genre definition only existed on the broadest level, and was far from universal. Vaporwave listeners were still heavily invested in creating categories *within* vaporwave, as evidenced by an ever-growing list

²⁸⁸ theflannelbeard, *Reddit*, January 8, 2016,

https://www.removeddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/4019m3/_/cyqmjr2/.

²⁸⁹ HammerkOngoul, “Discussion | What Is Vaporwave,” *Reddit*, February 28, 2017,

https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/5wo8rj/discussion_what_is_vaporwave.

²⁹⁰ Clayh5, *Reddit*, November 7, 2017,

https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/7befdo/anyone_else_miss_the_absurd_enigma_that_vaporwave/dpi29ex/?utm_source=reddit&utm_medium=web2x&context=3.

²⁹¹ [deleted], “The Future of Vaporwave,” *Reddit*, January 18, 2017,

https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/5os8ez/the_future_of_vaporwave/.

of subgenres proposed in various forum posts and Bandcamp tags. Bandcamp itself published an article detailing ten of these subgenres, and while some labels like future funk were so prevalent in the vaporwave community as to be uncontroversial, others were much more niche.²⁹² Some on the vaporwave subreddit took issue with this extensive taxonomy, like a user posting their exhaustion in the face of “each new artist [feeling] like they are creating their own subgenre.” And while this listener grounded their frustration in concerns that “subgenres can become really arbitrary and limit your musical pallet [sic],” the post received few upvotes and commenters were unsympathetic, expressing their appreciation for subgenres’ fine-grain distinctions.²⁹³ On music platforms like Bandcamp, subgenre tags served as a primary method of finding music, so a more elaborate folksonomy meant a greater degree of discoverability and user choice amid a plethora of options.

The vaporwave community’s constant taxonomizing stood in stark contrast with the genre’s most popular artists, many of whom expressed an indifference to genre in press interviews. Blank Banshee, one of the most visible “vaportrap” artists, sidestepped community squabbles over his music’s genre status by stating “I feel like it’s my job to make the music and other people’s job to decide what it is...ultimately, whatever people want to call my music is cool with me.”²⁹⁴ Similarly, in a profile titled “Don’t Pigeonhole Nmesh as Vaporwave,” the titular producer noted that he didn’t view

²⁹² Simon Chandler, “Genre As Method: The Vaporwave Family Tree, From EccoJams to Hardvapour,” Bandcamp, November 21, 2016, <https://daily.bandcamp.com/lists/vaporwave-genres-list>.

²⁹³ JohnNieuwsma, “The Dangers of Genres and Subgenres,” *Reddit*, October 13, 2017, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/767i7k/the_dangers_of_genres_and_subgenres/.

²⁹⁴ Simon Chandler, “After a Three-Year Hiatus, Blank Banshee Breaks His Silence with ‘MEGA,’” Bandcamp, October 17, 2016, <https://daily.bandcamp.com/features/blank-banshee-interview>.

himself as a “vaporwave artist” so much as a producer working with similar materials.²⁹⁵

Finally, Lindsey French and George Clanton, co-founders of the record label 100%

Electronica, resisted being typecast as vaporwave artists, though they also

acknowledged the genre’s marketing potential. Explaining vaporwave’s inclusion among their label’s Bandcamp tags, Clanton admitted:

It’s a marketing tactic. People who are into vaporwave will go to the 20th page of that tag and listen to everything, looking for 14-year-old kids with tape labels and trying to find the next big thing. Even if we don’t get involved in the scene, when we have stuff come out we’re always #1 on that vaporwave tag. It forces everyone to take notice and discuss “is this actually vaporwave?” “Fuck this dude! Why is he singing?” I think that’s hilarious...My music is not vaporwave but it’s close enough that people can find something in it they like. Vaporwave is a total meme, but there’s really cool stuff about it. And I can’t think of any other tag where people are so passionate.²⁹⁶

Clanton aptly describes vaporwave as a *tag*, clarifying just how inextricable the genre was from metadata. And this metadata mattered a great deal to listeners, as evidenced by the continual infighting around topics like hardvapour and genre boundaries—infighting that had repelled producers besides David Russo from the genre and its community. A December 2017 subreddit post noted this pattern, referencing Ramona Xavier and alluding to other unnamed producers, all of whom purportedly loathed their association with the genre. “Has vaporwave become a mockery? Simply being attached to the title seems akin to catching the plague, judging by how alot [sic] of artists repel from it. The title vaporwave has grown an attached stigma, has it become too synonymous with bad memes and lazy production?”²⁹⁷ Numerous commenters

²⁹⁵ Marvin Lin, “Don’t Pigeonhole Nmesh as Vaporwave,” Bandcamp, August 7, 2017, <https://daily.bandcamp.com/features/nmesh-pharma-feature>.

²⁹⁶ Toby Shorin, “100% Electronica Is Making Pop Anthems of the Future,” The Hundreds, March 14, 2017, <https://thehundreds.com/blogs/content/100-electronica-negative-gemini-george-clanton-interview>.

²⁹⁷ Mothmanlive, “Gods Which Hate Their Creations - Refusal to Be Labeled Vaporwave,” *Reddit*, December 27, 2017,

concurred with the original post, offering a variety of possible reasons for the community's dicey reputation. One of the more thoughtful of these responses alluded to the same type of squabbling mentioned in Clanton's aforementioned interview: "many of the artists you've mentioned have expressed frustration at the vaporwave community - even this subreddit in particular - due to its rigid and static expectation of what "vaporwave" should be...Genre purists preferred to bicker endlessly over what is and isn't vaporwave to preserve the imaginary integrity of the genre."²⁹⁸

This tension lay at the heart of the vaporwave community: some listeners perceived the genre as a nebulous umbrella category with porous stylistic borders, while others held stricter views of what emphatically did *not* qualify as vaporwave. Both camps were often invested in an extensive taxonomy of subgenres, but only one acknowledged listeners' possible role in drawing genre boundaries. In the final years of the decade the former perspective grew increasingly prevalent, culminating in a definition of vaporwave centered on "a community more than a genre."²⁹⁹ And with a growing desire among listeners to discuss familiar categories and celebrate past glories, that community increasingly resembled a fandom.

https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/7mk2ho/gods_which_hate_their_creations_refusal_to_be/.

²⁹⁸ mellowtooth, *Reddit*, December 28, 2017,

https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/7mk2ho/gods_which_hate_their_creations_refusal_to_be/druoic9/?utm_source=reddit&utm_medium=web2x&context=3.

²⁹⁹ grxxnbvstvr, *Reddit*, December 28, 2017,

https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/7mk2ho/gods_which_hate_their_creations_refusal_to_be/drussjm/?utm_source=reddit&utm_medium=web2x&context=3.

CHAPTER 4: A TRADITIONALIST COMMUNITY EMERGES

The vaporwave community returned to a state of relative calm at the end of the 2010s, remaining coherent after an unprecedented influx of genre citations. Stability emerged from Traditionalist discourse, where listeners reasserted the primacy of pre-existing genre qualities and subgenre taxonomy: a “folksonomy.”³⁰⁰ The vaporwave folksonomy was such an important source of meaning that listeners and producers sought to singlehandedly create new additions to its lexicon—sometimes even as a purely hypothetical exercise. The vast majority of these efforts failed, with very few labels being adopted by the broader community. Instead, they functioned as a personalized component of musical meaning: bespoke tags as an album’s metatext. While such linguistic play flourished on an individual level, the broader community proved more restrictive, with an even greater investment than before in preserving the genre from internal and external threats. These preservationist impulses paralleled those in popular media fandoms, where past glories are valorized and present departures questioned. And as in many fandoms, listeners sometimes amassed large collections of physical objects—in vaporwave’s case a bevy of release formats from audiocassette to floppy disk. Regardless of one’s ability to listen to their albums, collections document the history of an often-intangible genre, seeking physical evidence of a musical tradition subject to the Internet’s ephemeral nature.

³⁰⁰ David Barton, “Tagging on Flickr as a Social Practice,” in *Discourse and Digital Practices: Doing Discourse Analysis in the Digital Age* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 59.

Playing with Metadata

By the end of the decade, vaporwave had become a genre so amorphous as to resist any single stylistic definition. Uptempo dance tracks sat alongside ambient soundscapes, with community consensus bringing the two together under the same generic umbrella. However, this consensus was never unanimous. Listeners continually debated a familiar range of topics, with particular emphasis on those dealing with vaporwave's definition or meaning. These discussions align with Jennifer Lena's identification of Traditionalist community dynamics, where participants "expend a great deal of energy fighting with each other about the models they construct to represent their music and the canon of its iconic performers. They argue over which instruments and vocal stylings are appropriate, and they may even battle over the place and time when the music originated."³⁰¹ Arguments in the vaporwave community covered subgenre labels, stylistically-adjacent sister genres, "gatekeepers" policing genre activity, and collectors of physical media. All speak to the discursive tension present in a broadly stable genre community, concealed by the concrete nature of a metadata tag.

The vaporwave folksonomy held such strong sway over listeners that many sought to coin their own subgenres. Whether through their own music or as a hypothetical exercise, community members proposed new additions to vaporwave's canon—including a metadata tag ready for other to adopt. And though many of these subgenres were never adopted by the community, their creators didn't seem to mind. Instead, the very act of coining a new tag was a core part of their musical experience. As on other sites that display user-created metadata, the tags "[were] being used

³⁰¹ Lena, *Banding Together*, 48.

individually to express a contingent meaning and not to link outwards.”³⁰² In the vaporwave community, metadata served as a tool for expression and interpretation.

Unlike top-down genre designations made by industry players like Billboard, bottom-up tags flourish on distribution services like Bandcamp and Soundcloud. Listeners and musicians alike can label songs with whatever tags they choose, no matter how idiosyncratic, and “the results...are instantly displayed before the public in the absence of a debate and consensus.”³⁰³ A music community only debates a tag after its use, and from future funk to hardvapour, such debates exerted a profound influence on vaporwave over the decade. These disputes mellowed by 2018, giving way to the folksonomy that framed Traditionalist discussions of the genre.

Listener comments on past controversies provide some of the starkest evidence of this trend. One subreddit member reposted the subgenre guide originally shared on 4chan in 2014, asking if the community actually shared the guide’s condescending attitude towards future funk. Noting how much the genre had changed in four years, including the obsolete “broporwave” epithet, a commenter responded that these attitudes

were mainly things that came out of Fortune 500 and Saint Pepsi kind of taking control of the scene's direction at that time, really taking it into a new direction...It seems ridiculous to try and push FF and vaportrap out of the genre now, but imagine being a VW fan in a time where you perceive the genre as sounding like, say, Eccojams and Infinity Frequencies, and then suddenly lots of new people are coming in who think it sounds like MACROSS 82-99 and Yung Bae. I'm sure you can see why that change would be concerning for some people!³⁰⁴

³⁰² Barton, “Tagging on Flickr as a Social Practice,” 64.

³⁰³ Tamas Tofalvy, “‘MySpace Bands’ and ‘tagging Wars’: Conflicts of Genre, Work Ethic and Media Platforms in an Extreme Music Scene,” *First Monday* 19, no. 9 (September 2014), <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v19i9.4354>.

³⁰⁴ TehhBobb, *Reddit*, September 12, 2018, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/9f46k7/does_anyone_have_a_higherdefinition_version_of/e5uusib/?utm_source=reddit&utm_medium=web2x&context=3.

Where more beat-focused styles like future funk and vaportrap were once hotly contested, they and many others listed on this guide were now regular subjects of subreddit discussion. Listeners often posted threads asking others for their favorite subgenre, and responses were plentiful, citing a bevy of precise terms including future funk, vaportrap, broken transmission and mallsoft.³⁰⁵ Even utopian virtual—music made from MIDI presets in the vein of James Ferraro’s *Far Side Virtual*—garnered a small fandom despite “never really [catching] on.”³⁰⁶ In all of these discussions, listeners rarely questioned the existence of such categories or whether they “belonged” within vaporwave; instead, they viewed them as stable, knowable entities within the community folksonomy. As Christopher Charles argues, “it is useful to treat genre terms as *resources* on which participants draw as they engage with a music scene. These are components of the cultural ‘tool kit’...used to create meaningful forms of musical and social experience, and they are continually tested and re-tested by participants through their strategic engagements with a music scene.”³⁰⁷ Since vaporwave listeners engage with the genre on streaming platforms that prioritize metadata, these tags serve a vital function in describing music or discovering new releases.

³⁰⁵ Toeknee99, “What’s Your Favorite Subgenre and Your Favorite Album from That Subgenre?,” *Reddit*, October 21, 2018, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/9q52gm/whats_your_favorite_subgenre_and_your_favorite_album_from_that_subgenre/; [deleted], “What Are Your Favourite Subgenres of Vaporwave?,” *Reddit*, August 15, 2019, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/cqpx5a/what_are_your_favourite_subgenres_of_vaporwave/; Ikeabutmoremusical, “Favorite Sub-Genres?,” *Reddit*, August 10, 2018, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/964eu0/favorite_subgenres/; saltypyramid, “Time To Spread Some Positivity, So Let’s Talk Sub-Genres!,” *Reddit*, May 1, 2018, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/8g9dz9/time_to_spread_some_positivity_so_lets_talk/.

³⁰⁶ elaiosome, “Subgenre Discussion: Midijams / Utopian Virtual,” *Reddit*, January 16, 2018, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/7qwx51/subgenre_discussion_midijams_utopian_virtual/.

³⁰⁷ Christopher Charles, “Genre in Practice: Categories, Metadata and Music-Making in Psytrance Culture,” *Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music* 12, no. 1 (2020): 25, <https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.12801/1947-5403.2020.12.01>.

Discovery hinged on the degree to which community members used a given tag, yet the practice became so widespread that alongside more established subgenres, a bevy of more niche labels circulated with lower degrees of popularity. At one point “naturewave”—releases with sounds and visuals reminiscent of outdoor environments—seemed primed to gain a permanent foothold, with Bandcamp’s editorial arm even publishing an article on the style in 2017. And while author Simon Chandler admitted that naturewave “[wasn’t] big enough to be recognized as a legitimate subgenre by the vaporwave community, the number of albums that this term describes [had] been steadily growing since at least 2014.”³⁰⁸ Two years after Chandler’s article, though, naturewave had fallen by the wayside. Responding to an aforementioned post asking for listeners’ favorite subgenres, one Reddit user named naturewave even though “[they were] pretty sure at this point [it] had all it’s [sic] major releases dissolved into utopian [virtual] and not many artists use the tag anymore.”³⁰⁹ As Charles noted, community participants constantly test and re-test genres, and in vaporwave that process often saw a term like naturewave fail to reach the commonplace status of a future funk or a vaportrap.

At the most obscure level, sincere subgenre categories bled into jokes mocking the proliferation of such labels. In response to a subreddit post asking for the “most unknown sub-genres” of vaporwave, some commenters mentioned rarely-used terms like “tumblewave” and “bardwave,” while a handful of users expressed appreciation for

³⁰⁸ Simon Chandler, “In ‘Naturewave,’ Forest Sounds Mask Sinister Subtext,” Bandcamp, May 24, 2017, <https://daily.bandcamp.com/features/vaporwave-naturewave-list>.

³⁰⁹ DrDrewYeah, *Reddit*, August 15, 2019, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/cqpx5a/what_are_your_favourite_subgenres_of_vaporwave/ewyzghz.

aquatic-themed albums described as “fishvapour.” On the other hand, the thread’s most upvoted comment simply named vaporwave as the user’s favorite genre, and another listener, referencing a rapper popular during vaporwave’s earliest years, quipped “azealiawave: a subset of vaporwave based solely on samples of songs from the small period of time where Azealia Banks was culturally relevant.”³¹⁰

As with many aspects of the vaporwave community, distinctions between sincere and ironic uses of a subgenre term weren’t always clear. The phrase “vaporwave 2” began appearing in mid-2018, first in the Bandcamp tags of a few albums, then in a Twitter video posted by prominent producer Dan Mason.³¹¹ The same month as Mason’s video, vaporwave 2 appeared as the most upvoted response to another post asking for “rare subgenres,”³¹² and the phrase reappeared in a later thread discussing vaporwave’s “next big thing.”³¹³ By the following spring, listeners began asking for clarification on what vaporwave 2 even *was*, their posts garnering a mix of confusion, jokes, and earnest answers.³¹⁴ Mason himself offered the style’s most succinct definition—“vocal vaporwave”—while another gave lie to the phrase’s origin as a joke.³¹⁵ However, a user suggested that at least one producer had “embraced the term

³¹⁰ ExperimentalRecords, “Most Unknown Sub-Genres?,” *Reddit*, January 3, 2018, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/7ny873/most_unknown_subgenres/.

³¹¹ Dan Mason, “Dan Mason ダン・メイソン on Twitter,” Twitter, July 16, 2018, <https://twitter.com/DanMasonVapor/status/1018895238188945408>.

³¹² ExperimentalRecords, “Most Unknown Sub-Genres?”

³¹³ elaiosome, “New Subgenres or Tendencies within Vaporwave? What Do You Think Will Be the next Big Thing?,” *Reddit*, November 29, 2018, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/a1mgtj/new_subgenres_or_tendencies_within_vaporwave_what/.

³¹⁴ [deleted], “Vaporwave 2?,” *Reddit*, April 20, 2019, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/bfj24s/vaporwave_2/.

³¹⁵ Dan Mason, *Reddit*, April 19, 2019, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/bf2hcp/i_saw_some_songs_tagged_with_vaporwave_2_today/elb65yi/; John Beeden, *Reddit*, April 19, 2019, https://www.removeddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/bf2hcp/i_saw_some_songs_tagged_with_vaporwave_2_today/elao0dk/.

unironically,” leading another to observe that “the only way one can officially start a vapor microgenre is through it’s [sic] creation initially being a ‘joke’ though!”³¹⁶ This echoes the work of linguistic scholar David Barton, who argued that “people are inventing new concepts and exhibiting linguistic creativity [with their tags]. In a meme-like way these can get picked up by other users.”³¹⁷ The frequently humorous nature of memes and joke tags hark back to the microgenre discourse of the early 2010s, with witch house and even vaporwave beginning as ironic gags. Unlike those two terms and successors like future funk, “vaporwave 2” never became popular enough to enter the folksonomy.

Many of these fledgling styles, both sincere and ironic, were heavily defined by their visual traits rather than any distinct sonic qualities. This emphasis on visuals carried on the legacy of Simpsonwave, achieving niche popularity on platforms like YouTube and Instagram rather than Bandcamp and Soundcloud. One listener described “sovietwave” as “the aesthetics of communist cultures put into vaporwave...sometimes its [sic] just a video of a military march with vaporwave in the background.”³¹⁸ To that latter point, another commenter wrote that “there are a lot of -wave ‘genres’, and almost always, it just means vaporwave/synthwave/chillwave with art and imagery centered around the theme in question. Simpsonwave is a great example.”³¹⁹ Simpsonwave

³¹⁶ power_lunch and ABridge27, *Reddit*, April 19, 2019, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/bf2hcp/i_saw_some_songs_tagged_with_vaporwave_2_today/elaovjh.

³¹⁷ Barton, “Tagging on Flickr as a Social Practice,” 64.

³¹⁸ Luminous_Fantasy, *Reddit*, September 30, 2019, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/dbaexi/can_someone_explain_sovietwave_to_me/f1zlqgb.

³¹⁹ XOmniverse, *Reddit*, September 30, 2019, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/dbaexi/can_someone_explain_sovietwave_to_me/f20lasn.

videos frequently appeared in discussions of these “visual subgenres,” and opinions on them ranged from appreciation to disdain to disinterest. Some commenters credited Simpsonwave as their introduction to vaporwave, some bemoaned it as “part of [a] greater watering down of vaporwave...and retro-minded media in general,” and others simply asked “wasn't that just literally one video? Yeah go for it but I'd hardly call it a genre.”³²⁰ And while the bulk of commenters viewed “visual subgenres” with at least a degree of suspicion, a vocal minority praised similar videos based on other 1990s cartoons, which were sometimes combined under the umbrella term “nickelodeonwave.”³²¹

These naming conventions follow broader Internet genre trends, which often see one of a few prefixes or suffixes attached to an adjective. Returning to Christopher Charles, “genre has become more modular; rather than full descriptions, many of today's genre terms function as units which can be joined together into larger assemblages. These might not even be full words but rather fragments of words.”³²² Charles even notes the online proliferation of “-wave” genres including vaporwave and Sovietwave: one instance among many of genre labels serving as a descriptive tool. And though many of these visual genres circulated in small social groups beyond Reddit, the terms still held meaning for those individuals.

Linguistic genre play was so pervasive in these communities that the practice even appeared among isolated individuals. Alongside strains of vaporwave that found a

³²⁰ joshuatx, *Reddit*, July 22, 2019, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/cgeq4i/whats_everyones_opinion_on_simpsonwave_and_other/euh656g; feared_rear_admiral, *Reddit*, July 22, 2019, https://www.removeddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/cgeq4i/_euhqto0/.

³²¹ Faelixx, *Reddit*, July 23, 2019, https://www.removeddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/cgeq4i/_eujzpkv/.

³²² Charles, “Genre in Practice: Categories, Metadata and Music-Making in Psytrance Culture.”

niche audience, some producers attempted to singlehandedly coin new subgenres with their music. As one listener described the trend, “there are people christening new subgenres every day and calling themselves innovators without anybody else using their tags.”³²³ For example, the producer Vacation Bible School termed their music “churchwave...a genre similar in sound to mallsoft or vapordrone, but uses old worship music as its foundation. It attempts to capture the nostalgia of growing up as a church kid, but is suitable for audiences of all faith or none.”³²⁴ Similarly, BloomSTRAD labeled their work as “V2k”—vaporwave that samples sounds from the 2000s—describing their creation of the category as a result of “[finding] it hard to box my content into a subgenre.”³²⁵ And finally, Hanoverian Dream announced their creation of “springvapor...influenced by vaporwave, new age, ambient, elegant touches of classical and baroque, and slight elements of the psychedelic music of the 1960s...[creating] a feel of spring-like optimism, like a pond reflecting the golden sunrise to the sound of birds.”³²⁶ Responses to all three of these posts were largely positive, with listeners viewing each proposed subgenre as both a novel concept and a useful categorical term. For the creators of churchwave, v2k, and springvapor, others’ use of their terms seemed only a passing concern. In line with Barton’s discussion of the “contingent

³²³ John_Beeden, *Reddit*, November 29, 2018,

https://www.removeddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/a1mgtj/_/earn1az/.

³²⁴ VBS_Official, “New Mallsoft-Related Genre ‘Churchwave.’ Vacation Bible School’s Second Album,” *Reddit*, July 24, 2018,

https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/91msd1/new_mallsoftrelated_genre_churchwave_vacation/.

³²⁵ Sans_Aovel, “The V2k Subgenre,” *Reddit*, March 20, 2019,

https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/b3ff4h/the_v2k_subgenre/.

³²⁶ HanoverianDream, “Springvapor, a Glorious New Vaporwave Sound,” *Reddit*, March 7, 2019,

https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/ayhd77/springvapor_a_glorious_new_vaporwave_sound/.

meaning” of user tags, these three producers viewed genre metadata as part of their musical output: a conceptual frame for discovering and understanding their work.

Community members sometimes went a step further, proposing hypothetical labels for styles of vaporwave that didn’t even exist. In response to the aforementioned Simpsonwave thread, one user wrote that they “came up with a few [visual sub-genres] myself if anyone wants to use them,” including “westwave,” “hollerwave,” and “mob pop.” These three terms referred to theoretical offshoots inspired by film westerns, rural Appalachia, and the Italian Mafia, respectively, and like most other fledgling “subgenres,” found minimal traction among producers or listeners.³²⁷ And when another person tried to coin “futurewave” based on “fears regarding the turn of the new millennium [sic] and the technologies that come with it,” commenters pointed out that the more established faux-utopian style already covered that thematic territory.³²⁸ Again, generic speculation reveals just how accustomed listeners and musicians both were to thinking about music in these categorical terms. Folksonomic discussion became its own source of pleasure.

Amid all of this debate over genre categories, relatively few commenters took issue with such taxonomic enthusiasm. Jokes on the subject occasionally surfaced, though these posts were usually cheeky observations more than overt critique.³²⁹ On the rare occasion someone did question the community’s fixation on labels, they often

³²⁷ KidVid712, *Reddit*, July 25, 2019, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/cgeq4i/whats_everyones_opinion_on_simpsonwave_and_other/euwn17r.

³²⁸ Z-nab27, “I Just Had a Random Idea for a New Sub-Genre,” *Reddit*, October 25, 2018, https://www.removeddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/9rfmg4/i_just_had_a_random_idea_for_a_new_sub_genre/.

³²⁹ DoritoCookie, “Man These Spinoff Genres Are Getting Outta Hand Now,” *Reddit*, November 3, 2018, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/9tvf5x/man_these_spinoff_genres_are_getting_outta_hand/.

took issue with the trend of producers claiming to singlehandedly create a new genre with their music. In response to the aforementioned “v2k” post, one listener wrote that “the way this typically works is that you create new music, and if people like it, they will categorize it for you...you don't get to decide arbitrarily which subgenre you belong to, and one artist cannot simply invent a new subgenre out of thin air.”³³⁰ And in response to one producer claiming to have invented “hyperfolk” and “disco lento,” another Reddit user took a more aggressive stance: “You didn't ‘make a sub-genre’ if literally no one else makes music under the genre's name. Anybody in the world could upload straight silence to bandcamp and label it fuckin cornwave and would have the same legitimacy to claim that they'd invented a genre as you.”³³¹ Some dissenters forwarded a more historical critique. Responding to the previously-cited thread on 4chan’s subgenres guide, one commenter wrote that “it irks me how readily people draw genre lines these days. Genres are defined by how people test their boundaries over time, not by strict definition a few years after...inception.”³³²

Users like these argued for a definition of genre closer to David Brackett’s, one less invested in “[acts] of individual inspiration...than of entering into an ongoing dialogue with other participants in a given artistic field.”³³³ And while such a perspective doesn’t necessarily preclude the linguistic play of tags like “vaporwave 2,” it questions many community members’ willingness to immediately incorporate such labels into the

³³⁰ tumors4kissinger, *Reddit*, March 21, 2019, https://www.removeddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/b3ff4h/the_v2k_subgenre/ej0ux92/?utm_source=reddit&utm_medium=web2x&context=3.

³³¹ John_Beeden, *Reddit*, October 26, 2018, https://www.removeddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/9rfmg4/_/e8hydok/.

³³² LordApocalyptica, *Reddit*, September 12, 2018, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/9f46k7/does_anyone_have_a_higherdefinition_version_of/e5vjtmf.

³³³ Brackett, *Categorizing Sound*, 14.

broader folksonomy. All of these comments earned a decent number of upvotes from other Reddit users, suggesting that at least some listeners held similar reservations. But a sizable majority of the subreddit found fine-grain subgenre distinctions useful, both as stylistic shorthand and as a tool for discovering new releases. As one user put it, “fans [use genres] so they can find more artists and albums similar to their favorite artists and albums.”³³⁴ This utility reflects how platforms like Bandcamp and Soundcloud—those most popular among vaporwave listeners—surface both site- and user-created tags in their interfaces. Metadata functions as a primary method of music discovery, so the community follows suit with their rhetorical priorities. By contrast, a streaming service like Spotify hides most metadata, making it a better tool for finding songs previously known to the listener at the cost of unexpected discoveries via folksonomies.³³⁵

Gatekeeping Genre

Though the vaporwave community had recovered from the disruptions of 2016, the tireless boundary work that ensured that recovery remained in full force at decade’s end. Listeners fiercely debated both external and internal “threats” to vaporwave’s purity. On the former front: online “sister genres” with sonic traits and cultural nostalgia similar to vaporwave; on the latter front: an increasing dismissal of sample-based vaporwave as lazy or otherwise subpar, as well as an increasing dissatisfaction with Reddit as a platform for community discussion. Such boundary work delineates what

³³⁴ FictionalGirlfriend, *Reddit*, October 16, 2018, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/9ombr0/what_defines_a_song_or_album_as_being_vaporwave/e7v71xv.

³³⁵ Amelia Besseny, “Lost in Spotify: Folksonomy and Wayfinding Functions in Spotify’s Interface and Companion Apps,” *Popular Communication* 18, no. 1 (2020): 14–15, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/15405702.2019.1701674>.

vaporwave should and should not be. Media fandoms operate in a similar manner, with people arguing for particular understandings of a given cultural object and appropriate fan practices.³³⁶ And rather than aligning with one stage in Lena's model or the other, this boundary work aligns vaporwave with both the Scene-based and Traditionalist stage, where genre gatekeeping defends against external *and* internal diversions.

Community critics of boundary work often described such efforts as “gatekeeping.” This gatekeeping—intense concern over delineating which albums and styles qualified as vaporwave—had been omnipresent in the community for years, repelling producers like David Russo from such strictures. And despite a robust folksonomy, individual listeners still regularly voiced their concerns over proper genre expressions. Commenters frequently argued over whether or not particular styles merited classification as vaporwave, like a post asking if ambient production styles constituted “true vaporwave.”³³⁷ People sometimes even called popular styles or individual musicians into question, like a listener asking the subreddit for genres they thought were mistakenly included within vaporwave. Highly-upvoted responses included established subgenres like future funk and vaportrap, as well as vaportrap figurehead Blank Banshee.³³⁸ Even *Floral Shoppe* came under occasional fire as “[not] true to the genre,” though most of the subreddit found that notion ridiculous.³³⁹ These posts were

³³⁶ Henry Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 54–57.

³³⁷ Uluwati, “Do You Consider the Ambient Aspect to Be True Vaporwave?,” *Reddit*, July 11, 2019, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/cc1pg0/do_you_consider_the_ambient_aspect_to_be_true/.

³³⁸ ExperimentalRecords, “What Genre Do People Count as Vaporwave but You Think Is Not Even close to Vaporwave?,” *Reddit*, September 1, 2018, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/9c3zk3/what_genre_do_people_count_as_vaporwave_but_you/.

³³⁹ SoCalledVaporbrat, “Ok, Floral Shoppe Is NOT Vaporwave,” *Reddit*, March 3, 2019, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/ax23pw/ok_floral_shoppe_is_not_vaporwave/.

so common that frustrated commenters began satirizing these gatekeepers, including one who posted a manifesto announcing that:

If I don't hear a sample from a 90's nu-disco track or SEGA Dreamcast game within the first 5 seconds, [I'm] done. If there's no reverb, delay, and phaser layered over reverb, delay, and flangers, [I'm] done. If the artist is from anywhere but coastal USA, the UK, Germany, [I'm] done... The only true vaporwave is the sound a pay phone makes when you dial 911 and slam it down after the operator picks up.³⁴⁰

Gatekeeping is a pervasive force in fan communities, where the text's "purity" is of paramount importance. In her history of online "emo" rock fandom, Judith Fathallah documents how similar conversations occurred in the genre's own Reddit and 4chan forums. As with vaporwave, emo listeners on the two platforms "were earnestly and urgently concerned with its definitions and positioned themselves as gatekeepers in opposition to incorrect ideas of what emo means, implicitly and explicitly constructing themselves as the corrective to other sites."³⁴¹ For emo fans, those "other sites" included Tumblr; for vaporwave fans, they included YouTube. In both cases, Reddit users sought to defend their respective genre from being "watered down" by external dilettantes.

Fueling this threat response was the popularity of so-called "sister genres": styles of music with aesthetic similarities to vaporwave despite emerging from distinct Internet communities. And while these genres often appeared alongside vaporwave in popular YouTube compilations and elsewhere, members of the vaporwave subreddit were deeply divided on whether these styles belonged within their community. "Lo-fi hip hop,"

³⁴⁰ trirarworchanemimy, "A Response to the Response to the State of Vaporwave," *Reddit*, February 22, 2019,

https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/atm1hu/a_response_to_the_response_to_the_state_of/.

³⁴¹ Judith May Fathallah, *Emo: How Fans Defined a Subculture* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2020), 105, muse.jhu.edu/book/78236.

one of the most popular of these genres, flourished in YouTube livestreams, where channel operators often used looped GIFs of anime teenagers and clips from *The Simpsons*. These channels still thrive today; while I'm writing this section, one of the most popular livestreams reaches nearly 30,000 viewers.³⁴² The video features an animated loop of a teenager studying at her bedroom desk with headphones on, her eyes half-shut in an apparent state of boredom. As she writes, she occasionally turns to gaze out the window at the city below, or perhaps at her cat lazily swishing its tail. Meanwhile, the livestream viewer—and possibly the teenager as well—hears a gentle stream of tracks selected by the channel operator (or perhaps an algorithm). These tracks often feature reverberant guitars or electric pianos akin to a Rhodes, the percussion is often buried in the mix, and tempos rarely surpass 80 beats per minute. The combination of visuals and audio creates a strange sense of ennui: feeling resigned to one's bedroom (and the Internet) despite yearning for the wider world outside.

Vaporwave fans describe their genre in similar emotional terms, and as with vaporwave, cultural critics often described lo-fi hip hop as a manifestation of millennial isolation and loneliness: “[aligning with] an extremely atomised society, whereas opposed to going out to a real physical location and listening to actual music, and actual human bodies next to you, people go online at three in the morning when the live stream is still going and talk to whoever else is up.”³⁴³ The COVID-19 pandemic only heightened this atomization, with millions of people socially isolating themselves

³⁴² Lofi Girl, “Lofi Hip Hop Radio - Beats to Relax/Study to,” YouTube, February 20, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5qap5aO4i9A>.

³⁴³ Grafton Tanner, quoted in Wil Jones, “How ‘lofi Beats to Relax/Study To’ YouTube Channels Define the Melancholy of a Generation,” Joe, July 29, 2018, <https://www.joe.co.uk/music/lofi-beats-to-relax-study-to-youtube-191373>.

according to public health directives and best practices. During these months of detachment, lo-fi hip hop channels saw a spike in viewership as listeners sought connection with others feeling a similar loneliness.³⁴⁴ As scholars Emma Winston and Laurence Saywood write, the genre “is both a constant soundtrack to navigate real life and a means of escaping it; it is both a tool with which to self-regulate alone and to connect with others.”³⁴⁵ This negotiation of isolation and community gives lo-fi hip hop much in common with vaporwave; however, despite a visual style clearly indebted to past vaporwave trends (including Simpsonwave), lo-fi hip hop diverged in its rhythms and timbres, favoring the “boom-bap” of 1990s styles over vaportrap’s more contemporary influences.

This aural difference proved the key point of contention for members of the vaporwave subreddit. Listeners who viewed lo-fi hip hop as a distinct genre often based their arguments in musical qualities or production techniques “In lofi hip hop the producers usually sample a tiny part of a song...and then they add a hip hop beat above it. For its part, Vaporwave producers sometimes sample an entire song, slow it pretty much and they usually add synths, reverb drums or even vocals above it.”³⁴⁶ Others suggested that the two genres were more musically similar than not, often using similar effects like reverb and tape hiss, and that the primary difference lay instead in the styles’ conceptual relationships to time. One listener described lo-fi hip hop as

³⁴⁴ Julia Alexander, “Lo-Fi Beats to Quarantine to Are Booming on YouTube,” *The Verge*, April 20, 2020, <https://www.theverge.com/2020/4/20/21222294/lofi-chillhop-youtube-productivity-community-views-subscribers>.

³⁴⁵ Emma Winston and Laurence Saywood, “Beats to Relax/Study To: Contradiction and Paradox in Lofi Hip Hop,” *Journal of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music* 9, no. 2 (2019): 50, [https://doi.org/10.5429/2079-3871\(2019\)v9i2.4en](https://doi.org/10.5429/2079-3871(2019)v9i2.4en).

³⁴⁶ Deelexmann, *Reddit*, March 14, 2018, https://www.removeddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/84g73e/what_are_the_main_differences_between_vaporwave/dvpavx1/?utm_source=reddit&utm_medium=web2x&context=3.

“lighthearted, simple, or even melancholic day to day life in the present,” as opposed to vaporwave’s evocation of “living something again or experiencing and feeling something familiar though you may never have [done so].”³⁴⁷ As with prior genre discussions, many listeners grounded their definitions in emotional responses. And while many on the subreddit held lo-fi hip hop as a genre related to but separate from vaporwave, others disagreed. Given the latter’s stylistic diversity, some suggested that lo-fi hip hop could easily exist within vaporwave’s purview. “It has enough substance to stand as its own genre, but so does future funk and vaportrap. [Lo-fi hip hop] could be seen as ‘vapor-boombap.’ At the end of the day, it’s all internet music born out of nostalgia for the 80s and 90s. Call it whatever you want. It shares common ancestors and influences.”³⁴⁸ Though vaporwave listeners disagreed on whether lo-fi hip hop merited inclusion in their genre community, the boundaries were at the very least porous, triggering the flurry of discussion.

A similar tension surrounded “synthwave”—a genre modeled after synthesizer music of the 1980s. Like lo-fi hip hop, synthwave appeared alongside vaporwave on YouTube in both user-created compilations and algorithmic video recommendations, and the genre enjoyed a particularly enthusiastic audience online. The song “Resonance” by the producer HOME became particularly popular in the years after its 2014 release, regularly appearing in the aforementioned compilations and on the vaporwave subreddit. “Resonance” features a strong sixteenth-note pulse, with a

³⁴⁷ easynoodlesmedia, *Reddit*, March 14, 2018, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/84g73e/what_are_the_main_differences_between_vaporwave/dvpdt29.

³⁴⁸ Grey_Goats, *Reddit*, August 3, 2018, https://www.removeddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/949ae7/how_lofi_beats_to_relaxstudy_to_youtube_channels/e3klc3i.

synthesizer that rests on each beat to emphasize the muffled kick and snare drum. Over the track's three-and-a-half-minute runtime, brighter synths emerge with a repeated melodic figure, though this lead never fully disrupts the underlying rhythmic momentum. As with other synthwave tracks, "Resonance" is clearly inspired by the film scores of composers like John Carpenter and Vangelis—another instance of aural nostalgia alongside vaporwave and lo-fi hip hop.

However, many members of the vaporwave community were quick to point out that "Resonance" decidedly did *not* merit inclusion in their genre, no matter how many times people posted about it.³⁴⁹ Listeners posted about "Resonance" so frequently that in their reminder that HOME produced synthwave, one commenter described the misunderstanding as "that point that seems to require being driven home with a 16-pound mallet every week."³⁵⁰ Many subreddit members described synthwave as, like lo-fi hip hop, a "sister genre" to vaporwave: distinct, but sharing musical characteristics and an investment in nostalgia for the 1980s.³⁵¹ Both of these "sister genres" align with Georgina Born and Christopher Haworth's description of a "nostalgia genre continuum" united by an investment in "the recovery, re-imagination and remediation of past popular-cultural and media epochs."³⁵² Lo-fi hip hop echoes 1990s hip hop, synthwave repurposes 1980s film scores, and vaporwave casts a wider net in its embrace of past business and consumer cultures. All are fundamentally concerned with the past, and for the vaporwave community at decade's end, this concern brought them to a state of

³⁴⁹ H3ILO_fR1eNd, "Just to Clear Something Up...", *Reddit*, August 6, 2017, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/6s1yln/just_to_clear_something_up/.

³⁵⁰ Lugia909, *Reddit*, August 29, 2020, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/ii42y1/unexplainable_feeling/g3ao7wo.

³⁵¹ AeonicButterfly, *Reddit*, March 7, 2019, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/ayee4f/nostalgia_music/ei10h4b.

³⁵² Born and Haworth, "From Microsound to Vaporwave," 625.

discursive stasis. Listeners repeated past debates on genre purity and external threats, so much so that the discussions arguably became as much a part of the genre as its aural or visual traits.

Among these evergreen subjects, perpetual concerns over vaporwave's possible "death" were as common as ever on the subreddit. Unlike past years, however, a clear majority of listeners rejected the possibility that vaporwave had died, with many expressing their irritation at the subject's persistence. In September 2018, a commenter observed that "vaporwave [had] been 'dying' for the last 4 years," and this frustration only grew more intense over the following months.³⁵³ When one listener posted their conviction that vaporwave had indeed died, one respondent joked that "no really guys, vaporwave is for sure dead this time," and in a thread the following year asking if the genre had died, a commenter vented that "it's definitely going to die if people keep asking this fucking question."³⁵⁴ Throughout 2019, people continued to raise their concerns (like vaporwave being ruined by mainstream exposure) and others continued to criticize, downvote, and sometimes ridicule those who repeated what they deemed an old canard.³⁵⁵

Alongside these discussions, others forwarded explanations of *why* concerns of genre death persisted so stubbornly. One view held that, particularly after hardvapour's provocations, the phrase "vaporwave is dead" had become "a meme...more dead than

³⁵³ Blaagon, *Reddit*, September 25, 2018, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/9iui6l/vaporwave_is_dying/e6mqz4/.

³⁵⁴ Prof_J_Turtle, *Reddit*, November 14, 2018, https://www.removeddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/9x0sm9/the_death_of_vaporwave_and_its_influence_on/e9oloaw; JHawkins7201, *Reddit*, October 16, 2019, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/dizh2t/its_2019_is_vaporwave_dead/f3zvn8.

³⁵⁵ [deleted], "Is Pop Music Going to Ruin Vaporwave?," *Reddit*, February 5, 2019, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/andxm0/is_pop_music_going_to_ruin_vaporwave/.

vaporwave itself at this point.”³⁵⁶ And in a genre defined in part by its function as a meme, the phrase “vaporwave is dead” perhaps becomes part of its broader meaning. From this perspective, the issue was less about musical quality or characteristics and more a simple matter of ironic grandstanding of a piece with much online discourse. Another common interpretation argued that those proclaiming vaporwave’s death disliked how the genre had developed since its origins. As one listener put it, “[‘vaporwave is dead’] is just a thing people say because [the genre] isn’t going in the direction some people want. They’re mad that the growth we saw around 2014-2015 isn’t at the same pace.”³⁵⁷ In this account, vaporwave’s doomsayers mourned the genre’s fall from past glories—glories associated with foundational releases like *Chuck Person’s EccoJams* and *Floral Shoppe*.³⁵⁸ Though the specifics differed, these complaints constitute yet another manifestation of the previously-discussed concern with genre purity. Not only did vaporwave need to be defended from external interference, it also needed protection from community efforts of insufficient quality.

Despite listeners’ ongoing affection for early, sample-based releases, many new producers creating work in a similar vein noted the community’s hostility towards their style of music. Commenting on “slowed and chopped 80s music,” one artist bemoaned that “that style of vaporwave gets panned really hard here for being ‘lazy wave.’ I exclusively make ‘lazy wave’ and it’s never gotten any traction here. Everything gets downvoted immediately because this sub sucks at being a community, but slowed and

³⁵⁶ Langanella, *Reddit*, September 20, 2018, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/9hk7ka/is_vaporwave_really_dead/e6d00oy.

³⁵⁷ orbital_sound, *Reddit*, December 12, 2018, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/a5k2w6/vaporwave_is_dead/ebn4mhb.

³⁵⁸ crasswriter, *Reddit*, March 26, 2018, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/8758ay/vaporwave_seems_to_be_alive_and_well_do_yo_u_agree/dwb5j7w.

chopped 80s music especially gets dumped.”³⁵⁹ The word “lazy” often appeared in these discussions as a catchall criticism, painting producers who based their work off samples as uncreative hacks clogging up the community with shallow releases. As one listener argued in a post titled “The ugly truth about vaporwave,”

Dragging vintage 70s/80s tracks into some music production software and slowing it down, adding some reverb here and there and exporting it is NOT being a producer. There are clear lines between sampling an existing work and blatantly ripping off a song. Most vaporwave unfortunately falls into the latter category. Copyright laws exist for a reason and slowing down the hard work of other peoples property and selling it on bandcamp for money is the epitome of scumbaggery.³⁶⁰

These sentiments represent a *profound* shift in the center of vaporwave’s gravity. Genre-defining releases like *Floral Shoppe* were sample-based, sometimes scarcely-edited affairs, and yet a sizable number of vaporwave listeners now found such an approach unappealing, despite continuing to praise those same early releases. For these commenters, their frustration was partly a matter of scale. As one of them described the issue, “classic style is *over-fucking-saturated*, there are literally thousands, tens of thousands, of albums identical to what you’re describing, and most of them are lazy bullshit.”³⁶¹ Given this attitude and occasional hostility, listeners sometimes cautioned aspiring producers against relying too heavily on sampled material. When someone asked the subreddit if it was acceptable to merely release a

³⁵⁹ vh1classicvapor, *Reddit*, October 16, 2018, 1, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/9omhnf/vaporwave_is_dying/e7wo926.

³⁶⁰ [deleted], “The Ugly Truth about Vaporwave,” *Reddit*, November 18, 2019, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/dyb7hz/the_ugly_truth_about_vaporwave/.

³⁶¹ [deleted], *Reddit*, March 29, 2018, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/87pquj/is_the_old_style_of_vaporwave_not_in/dwhhj4r.

slowed-down sample as-is, commenters strongly urged adding at least a few more alterations, otherwise “people may see it as lazy vapor.”³⁶²

More measured commenters elaborated on the “lazy” critique, explaining that people’s frustrations might not be a categorical response to all sample-centric releases. For one listener, “if its a sample that i’ve heard a hundred times before and [it isn’t] even hard to trace at this point, its lazy. *Thats* lazy. Not the production process.”³⁶³ Others agreed, drawing a distinction between method and quality: “the problem isn’t that just slowing down a song is simplistic. It’s that because the technique is so easy to do, it’s been used to death. And it creates these watered down imitations of vaporwave with no taste or creative vision.”³⁶⁴ A contrasting group of listeners took issue with the argument’s entire premise, arguing that such rhetoric constituted a form of community gatekeeping that unnecessarily limited vaporwave. In their “response to gatekeepers,” one Reddit user overtly praised the genre’s supposed laziness, suggesting that “if it wasn’t for how easy it is to make, I don’t think vaporwave would be as popular as it is today. In my opinion, a lot of the original and most groundbreaking vaporwave albums feel pretty low effort...I think that’s what makes this genre so interesting to me. It’s incredibly democratic.”³⁶⁵ From this perspective, critics of “lazy” vaporwave releases contradicted the genre’s democratic nature and made unreasonable demands of the community.

³⁶² VaporMan17, *Reddit*, June 4, 2018, https://www.removeddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/8ohczg/_/e03iviy/.

³⁶³ Naima_, *Reddit*, February 21, 2019, https://www.removeddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/at6bj1/a_response_to_gatekeepers/egze1v1.

³⁶⁴ quentin_tortellini, *Reddit*, July 14, 2018, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/8yvvpil/lets_stop_talking_about_lazy_vaporwave/e2eaohe.

³⁶⁵ kaleidoscopy, “A Response to Gatekeepers,” *Reddit*, February 21, 2019, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/at6bj1/a_response_to_gatekeepers/.

Throughout all of these gatekeeping debates—subgenre categories, sister genres, and “lazy” production—many commenters phrased their frustrations as (in part) a frustration with the vaporwave subreddit. Complaints about the subreddit were hardly limited to threads on those three subjects, though; people criticized the subreddit for a vast number of reasons, often even doubting the forum’s capacity to serve as a useful hub for the vaporwave community. Many of these critiques took issue with subreddit subscribers neglecting new music in favor of reposted memes, in the process “watering the scene down to lowest-common-denominator mush until it’s more of a fandom than an active genre.”³⁶⁶ As noted earlier, vaporwave community dynamics bear a strong resemblance to those in fandoms, and Reddit users’ suspicion of memes attest to that similarity. According to Fathallah, Reddit prioritizes word over image in its very design, contributing to a discursive culture where “rationality and logic are valued, [and] provision of evidence and the display of knowledge are respected.”³⁶⁷ On the vaporwave subreddit, however, this culture primarily operated in comments and text posts; scores of silent visitors still upvoted memes, references to already-familiar albums, and other posts with a prominent visual element.

Some users offered explicit examples of this indifference to new music, often invoking Simpsonwave as a point of comparison. One commenter wrote that “it breaks my goddamned heart that the latest 회사|AUTO album...has ~20 upvotes right now – when some tired “simpsonwave” bullshit has hundreds of upvotes,” and another compiled a list of new releases whose posts were heavily downvoted and lacked even a

³⁶⁶ Langanella, *Reddit*, August 19, 2018, https://www.removeddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/98m69n/_/e4hpnnf/.

³⁶⁷ Fathallah, *Emo: How Fans Defined a Subculture*, 103.

single comment.³⁶⁸ Finally, a community veteran offered a historical perspective, suggesting that the subreddit was once a far better place to discuss music:

Nobody listens to anything they don't already know. I started posting music here about 3 years ago, back then the sub had maybe a quarter of the subs it does now, and when I posted stuff it would get at least 50-100 plays...Now there are more people online than ever before, and believe it or not, less music is being posted than there was then, and I get 10 plays *if I'm lucky*.³⁶⁹

All these complaints and more appeared in a particularly representative post that bluntly asked “why is this subreddit so bad?” The post received over 900 upvotes and over 250 comments—a level of approval and engagement far beyond that of any usual discussion post, and strong evidence that dissatisfaction with the subreddit was hardly a niche concern. Many commenters blamed a lack of quality moderation on the forum, alleging that memes and shitposts—Internet content that “implodes seriousness”³⁷⁰—were allowed to flourish unchecked. “Waves of meme addicted children just completely took over everything. Mods (and many of the old regulars) were a little naive in thinking art would win out. Everyone good left as the sub became more and more cancerous, and now it's just something entirely different from what it was.”³⁷¹ Alongside complaints about moderators, listeners once again debated the role of “gatekeeping” within the community, albeit along different lines than before. Unlike threads on “lazy” production styles or the inclusion of sister genres, many of these commenters argued that

³⁶⁸ corgflip, *Reddit*, June 27, 2018, [https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/8e6ogr/is_there_a_bot_that_downvotes_everything_posted/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/8ud7jz/enough_with_the_goddamned_vapormeme_shit/e1ehcox; vh1classicvapor, “Is There a Bot That Downvotes Everything Posted to R/New?,” <i>Reddit</i>, April 22, 2018, <a href=).

³⁶⁹ Uncle_Boonmee, *Reddit*, November 26, 2018, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/a0k00f/do_vw_artists_hate_this_subreddit/eaijhuu.

³⁷⁰ Fathallah, *Emo: How Fans Defined a Subculture*, 84.

³⁷¹ Uncle_Boonmee, *Reddit*, September 15, 2018, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/9g3vkm/why_is_this_subreddit_so_bad/e61ehy0.

gatekeeping *subreddit posts* was vital for the health of the community. “I think the problem is that ‘gatekeeping’ has recently become a bad word, and something that people now try to avoid it at all costs. But in reality, it’s somewhat *necessary* to keep a community on track, particularly moderated internet communities like subreddits should be.”³⁷² This analysis of the term “gatekeeping” clarifies how site design and moderation can negatively impact community discourse, with one of Reddit’s hallmark features coming under particular fire.

In this thread and others, people identified shortcomings of Reddit as a platform—particularly its upvote system rewarding low-quality submissions—and forwarded alternatives they viewed as superior. One listener pined for the days of forums before the rise of social media, writing that “Reddit is garbage for quality content. Way too easy to post, and hard to lurk. An old school forum would be much better. More secluded, arcane, and without curation by upvotes.”³⁷³ More than traditional forums, though, users frequently praised Twitter as a platform far better-suited to discovering and discussing new vaporwave releases, thanks in part to users’ ability to stay in direct contact with their favorite labels. From this perspective, Twitter also provided an easy rebuttal to claims of vaporwave’s death: “The Twitter community is so much better, and the music coming out on labels have never been better. There are still new artists springing up and becoming well known in the community, reddit is just not where to look for it.”³⁷⁴ Listeners’ dissatisfaction with Reddit harked back to the vaporwave

³⁷² solestri, *Reddit*, September 16, 2018, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/9g3vkm/why_is_this_subreddit_so_bad/e62h24g/.

³⁷³ b3rn13mac, *Reddit*, September 16, 2018, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/9g3vkm/why_is_this_subreddit_so_bad/e62kwpa.

³⁷⁴ PinkerTaelz, *Reddit*, September 15, 2018, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/9g3vkm/why_is_this_subreddit_so_bad/e61iat4/.

community's earlier frustration with 4chan: in both cases users responded to site design by transitioning to another platform. 4chan was too anonymous and lacked a vaporwave-centric forum, while Reddit's upvote system incentivized visual content at the expense of discussion.

Memes and shitposts weren't the only factors critics took issue with; they also asserted that listeners on the subreddit were too focused on the genre's past glories, repeating the same discussions of classic albums. This investment in community history operates much like a fandom, where people re-circulate familiar narratives of creativity and form canons of great works. Ruth Fathallah describes how emo fans on Tumblr circulate "primers...piecing together commonly told histories of...bands and band members with photo and video evidence."³⁷⁵ She argues that these primers operate as community archives: "narrative databases" formed by the actions and aesthetic preferences of fans. Similarly, Mark Duffett observes that in music communities fans often operate as "historians, curators of material[,] and spokespeople for generational memory."³⁷⁶ In both accounts, fan activities preserve community understandings of the past for future listeners. For critics of the vaporwave subreddit, this preservation came at too high a price.

As one listener responded to another post pronouncing vaporwave dead, "outside of this subreddit, on communities such as Twitter, many new artists are making good to high quality music. It only appears as if the genre is dying, because this subreddit never upvotes new music or new artists. 98% of top page posts are great,

³⁷⁵ Fathallah, *Emo: How Fans Defined a Subculture*, 11.

³⁷⁶ Mark Duffett, *Understanding Fandom: An Introduction to the Study of Media Fan Culture* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 253.

classic albums that everyone already knows.”³⁷⁷ For critics of the subreddit, re-issues of old albums, especially *Floral Shoppe*, on physical media like vinyl and cassettes only exacerbated the problem. According to one commenter, “there is some great experimentation that's going on right now but it's just being overshadowed by people circle jerking over floral shoppe.”³⁷⁸ “Circle jerking” referenced posts from people celebrating their vinyl copies of *Floral Shoppe*, invoking a common Internet epithet for repetitive or self-congratulatory praise. The epithet, the homophobic slur cited in the previous chapter, and many other slang insults on Reddit and 4chan use male intimacy as a figure of ridicule. However, as with the vaporwave subreddit as a whole, disdain and pleasure were far more intertwined than not. Some listeners purchased records secondhand,³⁷⁹ others asked for sources to purchase the album,³⁸⁰ and those unable or unwilling to pay the high asking price of used copies bemoaned not being “one of the lucky ones” to successfully place an order upon initial release.³⁸¹ Overall, the community had a ravenous appetite for vinyl copies of *Floral Shoppe*.

Because of the frequency of posts about *Floral Shoppe* vinyl, some listeners held such a negative opinion of the subreddit that they thought it damaged—or even “killed”—vaporwave’s viability as a genre, predicting that “until people stop posting

³⁷⁷ Capitalist1991, *Reddit*, October 16, 2018, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/9omhnf/vaporwave_is_dying/e7v6a9c.

³⁷⁸ hotlinevibes, *Reddit*, October 16, 2018, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/9omhnf/vaporwave_is_dying/e7v9zbi.

³⁷⁹ Arthurlynch88, “Finally Got My Floral Shoppe Vinyl. (Because I Bought It on eBay),” *Reddit*, January 27, 2018,

https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/7tcgl7/finally_got_my_floral_shoppe_vinyl_because_i.

³⁸⁰ lovelymelanie, “Where to Get/Buy Floral Shoppe by Macintosh Plus??,” *Reddit*, August 20, 2019, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/csv8a1/where_to_getbuy_floral_shoppe_by_macintosh_plus/.

³⁸¹ chumon1992, *Reddit*, April 14, 2018,

https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/8bsun2/what_i_believe_might_be_the_last_ever_floral/dxcm9yd.

about [*Floral Shoppe*] vinyl everyday it will stay dead.”³⁸² While these commenters made their frustrations clear, they constituted a likely minority of subreddit subscribers. The fact that posts about classic albums and physical re-issues were so common and so highly-upvoted suggests that a silent majority of listeners enjoyed them, no matter how omnipresent. These listeners stood in stark contrast with those upvoting comments critical of the subreddit, again, often in favor of Twitter or other social media platforms.³⁸³

Posts about *Floral Shoppe* alone were so pervasive that they began negatively affecting the perceptions of people just discovering vaporwave and its subreddit. As one (purported) newcomer wrote,

judging by this subreddit [vaporwave is] basically a dead genre of people just discussing one album that came out years ago. Was this ever really a genre? Like are there many/any artists actually making music in this genre that people here are discussing? If I order this sub reddit by top all time, more than half the posts are just about Floral Shoppe.³⁸⁴

In response, commenters repeated many of the same explanations—that too much of the subreddit only upvoted memes and reposts of familiar albums, most of all *Floral Shoppe*. And in another thread, one listener suggested that contemporary vaporwave producers on Twitter viewed the subreddit in the same light: as a place “for Floral Shoppe bragging...post[ing] old known songs for easy karma and nothing else.”³⁸⁵ This

³⁸² chicagopalms89, *Reddit*, April 21, 2018, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/8dwoqg/so_vaporwave_is_dead_again/dxqps1v.

³⁸³ Uncle_Boonmee, *Reddit*, September 20, 2018, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/9hk7ka/is_vaporwave_really_dead/e6cts4d.

³⁸⁴ [deleted], “Serious Question: Is This a Vaporwave Subreddit or a Floral Shoppe Subreddit?,” *Reddit*, May 23, 2018, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/8ln42e/serious_question_is_this_a_vaporwave_subreddit_or/.

³⁸⁵ Deelexmann, *Reddit*, May 25, 2018, https://www.removeddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/8lynaq/_/dzk83wj/.

comment suggested a split in the vaporwave community: musicians and “serious” listeners gathered on Twitter, while fans more invested in memes and classic albums favored Reddit. As this comment reveals, value judgements often accompanied observations of the sites’ differences, with the subreddit’s unabashed fandom cast as cause for embarrassment. And just as unbecoming as their digital fixation on the past, many of these fans collected physical relics as well.

Collecting Vaporwave

While their boundary work suggested that the vaporwave community straddled the Scene-based and Traditionalist stages in Lena’s model, their emphasis on the genre’s past suggested a distinctly Traditionalist mindset. Vaporwave fans frequently revisited canonical albums from years past, preferring on Reddit to discuss familiar releases more than new ones. Many collected physical reissues of said albums, with some displaying photos of their collections or successful purchase of a rare item. These listeners behave in a similar manner to music collectors of decades past, but they also share many similarities with collectors in media fandoms. All three groups place a great deal of importance on the material nature of the objects they collect, making the focus of their fandom feel more permanent than their memories of it. “In an age where digital culture threatens to replace older forms and formats of entertainment, the material objects that fans collect remain solid signifiers of the historical significance of previous media texts.”³⁸⁶ Given listeners’ abiding interest in defining the genre and collecting its “artifacts,” vaporwave had not only become a Traditionalist genre, but a fandom as well.

³⁸⁶ Lincoln Geraghty, *Cult Collectors: Nostalgia, Fandom and Collecting Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2014), 2.

Many vaporwave fans on the subreddit were voracious collectors, amassing copies of their favorite albums on a variety of tangible formats. These collections constitute one of the most apparent similarities between the vaporwave community and other forms of media fandom: a passion for physical evidence of the adored cultural work. Devoted fans of the science fiction franchise *Star Trek* collect props and artwork from the series, with some spending thousands of dollars to build their private museums. In a very tangible sense, “fandom is about more than reading and writing; it [is] also about touching, smelling, controlling, and collecting the objects of fandom.”³⁸⁷ Vaporwave seems at first an odd cultural form to garner this type of fandom, given its origins as a digital genre. But by decade’s end, cassettes constituted a booming market, with most established labels releasing their albums in both tape and digital forms. And as vaporwave grew, labels kept pace with the increasingly popular practice of reissuing old albums on physical formats. Recalling Fathallah’s earlier discussion of emo fans, physical copies of vaporwave albums allowed the community to preserve its own history in a more palpable manner.

As noted above, “Floral Shoppe bragging” often centered on these reissues, and while the subreddit’s mass upvoting of such posts led critics to bemoan the way “they treat [this genre] like trading cards for meme addicted children,”³⁸⁸ the vaporwave community’s engagement with physical media extends well beyond and before the subreddit’s late-decade frenzy. In the genre’s early years, musicians, listeners, and label operators all demonstrated interest in releasing albums on cassette, challenging

³⁸⁷ Dorus Hoebink, Stijn Reijnders, and Abby Waysdorf, “Exhibiting Fandom: A Museological Perspective,” *Transformative Works & Cultures* 16 (2014), para. 4.6.

³⁸⁸ Uncle_Boonmee, November 26, 2018.

initial descriptions of the genre as a wholly disembodied affair. This trend accelerated over the following years, and as more press outlets began profiling vaporwave labels, mentions of analog formats became increasingly common. In 2016, a piece on Dream Catalogue noted that the label had reissued on vinyl major albums like 2814's *新しい日の誕生* and Vaperror's *Mana Pool*, the latter selling seven-hundred copies of *Mana Pool* on vinyl—an extremely high number for them or any vaporwave label.³⁸⁹ That same year, a 100% Electronica profile discussed the label's reissuing of chillwave album *Deep Fantasy* by S U R F I N G. In the four years since its initial 2012 release, *Deep Fantasy* had become a cult favorite in the vaporwave community, prompting Clanton to reissue four-hundred copies of the album on vinyl. Those copies sold out within six hours of release—testament to the intense demand for physical albums among vaporwave listeners.³⁹⁰

In the following years, as it became “increasingly common to find new and canonical records...being issued on vinyl and CD,”³⁹¹ a greater number of labels also began experimenting with more unconventional release formats. In 2018, a reporter for Rolling Stone surveyed the growing number of albums released on 3.5-inch floppy disks, such as those from Canadian label Strudelsoft. Label founder Sterling Campbell attested to the healthy demand for the format: “The first one that I did was this vaporwave artist called Cat System Corp and I had a run of like 20 floppy disks. And it fuckin’ sold out in 8 seconds.” Campbell and other label operators described the appeal

³⁸⁹ J. Edward Keyes, “Label Profile: Dream Catalogue,” Bandcamp, June 20, 2016, <https://daily.bandcamp.com/label-profile/label-profile-dream-catalogue>.

³⁹⁰ Louis Pattison, “S U R F I N G on ‘Deep Fantasy’ and Their Unlikely Rise to Cult Stardom,” Bandcamp, September 13, 2016, <https://daily.bandcamp.com/features/surfing-deep-fantasy-interview>.

³⁹¹ Simon Chandler, “Solidwave: The Top Physical Vaporwave Releases,” Bandcamp, February 2, 2017, <https://daily.bandcamp.com/lists/vaporwave-vinyl-releases>.

of floppy disks in both aesthetic and utilitarian terms. According to Matthew Isom, head of San Diego label Power Lunch, “floppies are cheaper than cassettes, they don’t have to be tediously dubbed, they look appealing, they’re available in a lot of colors and have cool designs that people like.”³⁹²

Alongside these appealing qualities, though, label operators sometimes struggled to find a reliable supply of floppy disks. According to Vlad Maftai, head of Romanian label Sea of Clouds, “I think the biggest challenge for me definitely was some of the floppy disks were so old and written and rewritten so many times, by the time I got to them they weren’t really working anymore. And sometimes I had to try to write an album five or six times on five different floppy discs [sic] until I found one that finally worked.” However difficult their creation, these releases promptly found an enthusiastic reception, given vaporwave listeners’ appetite for physical media. Sterling Campbell described this appetite: “you got guys in the Vaporwave Cassette Club on Facebook that post up these cassette tape collections that are worth thousands of dollars. It’s insane. And a lot of these people, I don’t even think a lot of ’em play the shit. They just kind of put it on their shelf.”³⁹³ This speculation aligns with popular conceptions of collectors as obsessive, even pathologic types more invested in accumulating objects than using them.³⁹⁴ And yet in his survey of record collectors, Roy Shuker notes that these characteristics are indeed present, lending further credence to Campbell’s hypothesis.³⁹⁵

³⁹² Christopher R. Weingarten, “Revolution at 3.5”: Inside Vaporwave’s Mini-Boom of Floppy Disk Releases,” *Rolling Stone*, July 2, 2018, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/vaporwave-floppy-disk-trend-666085/>.

³⁹³ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁴ Mark Duffett, *Popular Music Fandom: Identities, Roles and Practices* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 167.

³⁹⁵ Roy Shuker, *Wax Trash and Vinyl Treasures: Record Collecting as a Social Practice* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 33.

On even more arcane fronts, Toronto netlabel Tiger Blood released an album on the type of prepaid “burner” cell phones commonly used by military servicemembers. Producer Andrew Salyer, also known as Geo Metro, researched and purchased the same models of phones he used while in the Navy and then transferred both the album and his personal contact information to the phones’ storage cards. Such a cumbersome format was part of Salyer’s intent: “Making music can feel sometimes like you’re screaming into a void, so the knowledge that someone would be forced to interact with my work in such an intimate way due to the presence of this big, heavy objet d’art somewhere in their home was satisfying in a way that little else has been.”³⁹⁶ For their part, many vaporwave listeners thrilled at the prospect of obscure objets d’art. One Reddit post asked which “dead formats” people wanted to see vaporwave released on, and the resulting discussion ballooned past 150 comments. Respondents mentioned obsolete home-video formats like Laserdisc, video-game formats like the Sony PSP’s Universal Media Disc, and even Tooth Tunes—toothbrushes that played songs through users’ teeth.³⁹⁷

Amid this enthusiasm for physical media, though, some members of the subreddit questioned how frequently people actually listened to music on these formats. Echoing Sterling Campbell’s remark on the Vaporwave Cassette Club, one commenter suggested that “most cassette tapes are bought by collectors who just want to own the

³⁹⁶ Mariana Timony, “The Merch Table: Tiger Blood Tapes Puts Music on Burner Phones,” Bandcamp, March 8, 2019, <https://daily.bandcamp.com/the-merch-table/merch-table-tiger-blood-tapes-burner-phone>.

³⁹⁷ NicolajK91, “What’s A ‘dead Format’ you’d like to See Vaporwave Being Released On?,” *Reddit*, September 23, 2018, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/9i7hp9/whats_a_dead_format_youd_like_to_see_vaporwave/.

item. I doubt everybody who buys one actually has a means to listen to it.”³⁹⁸ This parallels Roy Shuker’s findings, where several collectors were so invested in amassing objects that they refused to “part with any items from the collection, even when ‘old’ formats were no longer played, or, with vinyl, the collector no longer owned a working turntable.”³⁹⁹ In both cases, possession of the coveted item trumps its use value. And given vaporwave’s inherent investment in obsolete cultural objects, a collector owning music formats they are unable to play might actually hold some appeal. If vaporwave is by definition a nostalgic genre,⁴⁰⁰ and if “nostalgia is a sadness without an object,”⁴⁰¹ these collections try to make nostalgia incarnate.

While many thrilled at the prospect of owning copies of beloved vaporwave albums, a minority vented their irritation with how popular physical media had become. For those particularly frustrated, this collectors’ mindset contradicted the anti-capitalist ethos at the core of vaporwave, or at least the core as first articulated by Adam Harper. After purchasing a rare test pressing of Blank Banshee’s album *MEGA*, one person posted a photo of the record and received a few-hundred upvotes in less than a day; another member of the subreddit then posted a screenshot of the thread, remarking that “it’s often argued that vaporwave is anti-capitalist satire, yet its fans are often pretty consumerist.”⁴⁰² This critic elaborated further in a comment: “I guess that’s the ultimate

³⁹⁸ Dogmeat000, *Reddit*, November 7, 2019, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/dsz3ll/cds_are_so_80s_90s_and_00_so_what_gives/f6tff25/.

³⁹⁹ Shuker, *Wax Trash and Vinyl Treasures*, 46.

⁴⁰⁰ Laura Glitsos, “Vaporwave, or Music Optimised for Abandoned Malls,” *Popular Music* 37, no. 1 (2018): 101, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143017000599>.

⁴⁰¹ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 23.

⁴⁰² oneultralamewhiteboy, “You Know, It’s Often Argued That Vaporwave Is Anti-Capitalist Satire, yet Its Fans Are Often Pretty Consumerist,” *Reddit*, July 21, 2018, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/90rptg/you_know_its_often_argued_that_vaporwave_is/.

irony, that a subculture that mocks the 'Buy! Buy! Buy!' mentality marketed to us in the '80s and '90s has been co-opted into people who buy records as fast as they come out and brag about purchasing something few others have purchased."⁴⁰³ While some respondents were sympathetic to this critique, many more saw no issue in the original post and instead thought claims of vaporwave's anti-capitalist nature were overblown. Another critic took a more combative approach, posting a manifesto denouncing the "Stupid Irony of the Vaporwave Community":

We, the vaporwave fans, have become consumerists with only one goal in mind; to buy as much cassettes or vinyls as we can. We don't longer want to listen to the music on the vinyl or cassette, we only want to have them and have more of them so we can put them on a shelf and display them to people. A recent example of this would be the Floral Shoppe vinyl. It's totally insane how much people pay for that record just to have it.⁴⁰⁴

In keeping with this thread's stronger tone, respondents were more emphatic in their disagreement, ridiculing (and heavily downvoting) the post.

In these and other threads, a majority of commenters rejected the argument that vaporwave was an anti-capitalist genre. Many listeners found the premise pretentious, asserting that they "just like the music" and asking critics like those aforementioned to "stop making music so damn political."⁴⁰⁵ Others alluded to early press coverage of vaporwave, particularly Adam Harper's work, suggesting that "this whole counter-consumerism view of vaporwave was only given by lazy music journalists and its [sic] a

⁴⁰³ oneultralamewhiteboy, *Reddit*, July 21, 2018, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/90rptg/you_know_its_often_argued_that_vaporwave_is/e2sm8fd.

⁴⁰⁴ [deleted], "Stupid Irony of the Vaporwave Community," *Reddit*, May 25, 2018, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/8m3p26/stupid_irony_of_the_vaporwave_community/.

⁴⁰⁵ 90377Sedna, *Reddit*, August 4, 2019, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/clrezx/vaporwave_is_still_the_most_subversive_form_of/evxqi3g.

meme that should (honestly) be dead by now.”⁴⁰⁶ As with the community’s departure from critics’ emphasis on irony, the bulk of latter-day vaporwave listeners viewed the genre as having little to do with anti-capitalist politics. Some even suggested that vaporwave was actually a celebration of capitalism, not an ironic critique: “When I listen...it brings me back to [the 1980s and 1990s], where life was more simple and people seemed to be enjoying the fruits of capitalism.”⁴⁰⁷ Vaporwave’s wide definitional bounds didn’t only encompass musical style; they also included thematic content and relationship to source material. Given these disagreements, newcomers were sometimes unclear on vaporwave’s relationship to capitalism and consumer culture. When one such person asked if vaporwave was actually anti-capitalist, a commenter summarized the situation best by noting that “this very uncertainty is central to Vaporwave: like all things on the internet, it exists in a superposition of earnestness and irony.”⁴⁰⁸

As with many subjects within the vaporwave community, debates over vaporwave’s relationship to capitalism were frequent and intense, never fully resolving the genre’s ambiguity. These same discussions offered further proof that—on fronts ranging from musical style to production process to political outlook—vaporwave had become so varied that it resisted any simple, concrete definition. Listeners continued to

⁴⁰⁶ crooning, *Reddit*, August 4, 2019, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/clrezx/vaporwave_is_still_the_most_subversive_form_of/evxrald.

⁴⁰⁷ taylore383, “Unpopular Opinion: Vaporwave Embraces and Admires 80s and 90s Capitalist Culture,” *Reddit*, April 12, 2019, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/bck6pk/unpopular_opinion_vaporwave_embraces_and_admires/.

⁴⁰⁸ StrixLiterata, *Reddit*, November 7, 2019, https://www.reddit.com/r/Vaporwave/comments/dstv8z/so_is_vaporwave_ment_to_be_anti_capitalism_or_is/f6sooh7.

discuss vaporwave's "true" definition, with some seeking definitional stability amid an ever-shifting landscape of releases, tags, and disputes. The same conversation topics present throughout vaporwave's history showed no signs of disappearing, adhering to Jennifer Lena's description of a Traditionalist genre. Just as important as any stylistic quality, what most defined vaporwave at the end of the 2010s was the community surrounding the music. Listeners and musicians tagged albums as vaporwave, debated a given work's inclusion in the community, and group consensus over time most strongly shaped the genre's contours. For most of the decade, this community gathered on web platforms like Reddit and Bandcamp. However, vaporwave's stylistic and conceptual diversity became even more apparent at the community's first pair of in-person festivals: 100% ElectroniCON.

Created by the label 100% Electronica, 100% ElectroniCON assembled vaporwave artists from around the world, holding one-day festivals in New York City and Los Angeles on August 31 and October 19, 2019. I attended both festivals and observed how vaporwave continued to function as sound, community, and metadata, albeit in an offline setting of unprecedented scale. The festival lineups were as wide-ranging as the genre's online footprint, encompassing the future funk of Saint Pepsi, the mallsoft of 猫 シ Corp, and more unclassifiable artists like Fire-Toolz, who integrated synths typical of vaporwave with live guitar and screamed vocals indebted to metal. Even INTERNET CLUB performed at the second festival, representing the genre's original style with their turgid, lightly-edited loops of background music.

Most surprising, attendees of both festivals were far friendlier than any of the past years' online debates might suggest, making the sense of community immediately

tangible. Musicians gave me permission to record their performances, online friends met in-person for the first time, and audience members exchanged high fives over exciting pieces of apparel. On the train back from the first festival, I spotted another passenger wearing a マクロスMACROSS 82-99 jacket. After striking up a conversation with her, I learned that she was an editor of a (now-defunct) vaporwave webzine. And before we parted, she gave me an item her friend created by hand: a bar of soap with a color palette and array of cherry blossoms reminiscent of Arizona Iced Tea cans (a common element of vaporwave art and memes). Her generosity was emblematic of the entire community's.

Finally, conversations at both festivals confirmed how the vaporwave folksonomy held true even in offline settings. I overheard plenty of people discussing familiar subgenres, like the appearance of popular vaportrap producer Vaperror, and their use of tags on Bandcamp as a method of discovering new music. I also spoke with the organizer of Aessential, a three-day festival scheduled to take place during the spring of 2020 in Toronto. The organizer specifically described his event as focused on future funk, offering yet another reminder of how the style of music once derided as “broporwave” was now a thriving, accepted part of the community and its folksonomy. Unfortunately, while I purchased a ticket to Aessential soon after returning from 100% Electronicon, the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated the cancellation of the event. As with the webzine editor, though, I immensely appreciated this festival organizer's graciousness and willingness to speak with me about his love of the community.

The overt positivity of both 100% Electronicons was far removed from the trolling, shitposting, and gatekeeping that often prevailed on the vaporwave subreddit. Part of

this was no doubt due to people's willingness to say things online that they never would offline; part of this was likely due to the thrill of meeting community members—and friends made online—face-to-face for the first. Time. This was also a behavior modeled by the label that organized the festival. 100% Electronica co-founders George Clanton and Lindsey French had grown frustrated with the community's more vicious side, and they positioned their festival as an earnest corrective. As Clanton told one journalist, "[vaporwave] is a positive movement of people making music online...I'm using this platform to spread this idea of, like, 'Look what we can accomplish when we're being the nice guys.' You don't have to be edgy to be interesting. Actually, edgy's kind of played out. What's new and exciting is being kind of anti-ironic, anti-disingenuous."⁴⁰⁹ My experiences at their festivals suggested that Clanton and French were extremely successful. And while the pandemic may have interrupted plans for similar events, the festivals stand as a high-water mark for vaporwave: physical evidence of an online genre's ability to bring people together around sound, a sense of community, and metadata.

⁴⁰⁹ Tim Gagnon, "The Loudest Voices in the Chatroom: The Story of 100% Electronica," *Flood*, October 16, 2019, <http://floodmagazine.com/69953/the-loudest-voices-in-the-chatroom-the-story-of-100-electronica/>.

Conclusion: Researching Internet Genres

Internet music genres provide an unprecedented opportunity for researchers. Before the advent of digital communications technologies, scholars were largely limited to press accounts of a genre's development. Journalists often conducted interviews with musicians, label representatives, and promoters—all valuable work. But much of this work occurred after a genre had already solidified in the public consciousness, and much of it dealt with second- and thirdhand portrayals of listener sentiment. Whether involved in a genre community or not, the voices of individual listeners were rarely heard without substantial mediation. Most genre participants lacked avenues to make their opinions directly known to the U.S. mainstream, and though DIY zines attempted to counter this trend for independent punk musicians, creating a space where community members could communicate with each other free of intermediaries, these were labor-intensive and limited by the speed and spread of mail. The Internet changed all of this. Now any one can join a genre community from around the world, and members of a community can communicate almost instantly.

These communications hold untold value for any scholar interested in the development of popular culture, but that value has rarely been recognized by music scholars. *My Music*, published in 1993 by Susan Crafts, Daniel Cavicchi, and Charles Keil, stands as one important exception. Here, the authors interviewed ordinary listeners of different ages, many of whom lacked an overt tie to any genre subculture but lived no less vivid musical lives.⁴¹⁰ More recently, Judith Fathallah's *Emo* traces the online history of its titular genre through the words of its community members, drawing on

⁴¹⁰ Susan Crafts, Daniel Cavicchi, and Charles Keil, *My Music: Explorations of Music in Daily Life* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1993).

social media posts and images. Both of these books remain highly relevant for their centering of individual listeners' voices, and this dissertation aimed to accomplish similar goals. Genre lies at the heart of popular music, and thanks to the Internet, researchers can now take a hyper-detailed look at how these categories form. Even when a genre is in Jennifer Lena's Avant-garde stage, academics can read social media posts, observe sparsely-attended livestreams, and listen to self-released songs.

However, our ability to study Internet genres is directly connected to how well-preserved the activities of these genre communities are. Organizations like the Internet Archive provide an essential service, maintaining copies of an untold number of web pages, audiovisual files, books, and more. Any effort in this space, though—while indispensable—is bound to be partial. Too much content is created online for any one organization to preserve all of it. Preservation becomes more important in light of how frequently people and companies remove information from the Internet. Social media users might delete accounts or posts, while corporations might claim copyright violations on YouTube videos. For all of these reasons, scholars can't assume that Internet content relevant to music genres will persist in the same manner as print magazines of the last century. Instead, we must be more attentive to contemporary music communities, many of which express themselves through metadata. Examining tagging practices of the present and recent past will provide an instructive view of how members of genre scenes are using digital communication technologies. Waiting until these practices and their musical results have been codified in mainstream discourse may be too late.

The methods present in this dissertation offer a model for scholars interested in pursuing similar research. Core among these was my creation of a computer code to amass and organize over 74,000 posts from the vaporwave subreddit. My choice of Reddit over other platforms like Twitter was largely a matter of practicality: Twitter makes it far more difficult to reliably access a history of posts within a given window of time. Using the programming language Python, I wrote a script that resulted in a spreadsheet containing information about Reddit posts like the title, text content, number of comments, URL, and more. After obtaining this spreadsheet, I began reading posts that received the highest number of comments, staying attentive for common themes and topics of conversation. Then to widen my search, I read posts whose titles included those themes and topics. Finally, I read the most *controversial* posts, indicated by the highest and lowest amount of karma (approval and disapproval from members of the subreddit). Combining these three subsets allowed for a fuller picture of listener sentiment, even as many of the same concepts recurred.

All of these posts are as impermanent as an online collection of songs or images, which again raises the issue of preservation. Sometime between the writing and editing of this dissertation, Removeddit—a site that preserves deleted Reddit posts and comments—has gone offline. Many of my citations link to Removeddit, testifying to how useful the site was for illustrating community discourse. Fortunately, the service underlying Removeddit remains, so alternatives exist and continue to preserve countless posts; however, there is no guarantee that these sites will remain active in perpetuity. Only a few years ago, Myspace, a social media platform with an outsized place in 2000s music history, accidentally deleted most pre-2016 data from its

servers.⁴¹¹ The same could easily happen to any number of other sites, resulting in incalculable archival losses.

Outside of archivists' heroic efforts, academic study of Internet communities remains one of our best methods of documenting a history that is both ephemeral and omnipresent. And in many ways, contemporary music culture is *online* music culture, so our ability to understand the present hinges on the extent to which we engage with the now-accessible perspectives of billions. Past and present converge online, and Internet genres offer one lens through which we can examine both. Far from dead, genre as a concept continues to animate our musical practices, but the extent of this importance only emerges from the voices of ordinary listeners and community members. Relying solely on journalistic accounts would result in a more incomplete, more inaccurate account. Genres are created and sustained through the interactions of community members, and social media gives us an unprecedented, if fleeting, method of charting them. Though the context is new, this narrative also offers a window into the past, suggesting how genre communities formed, fought, and thrived in the pre-digital age.

⁴¹¹ Niraj Chokshi, "Myspace, Once the King of Social Networks, Lost Years of Data From Its Heyday," New York Times, March 19, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/19/business/myspace-user-data.html>.

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