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The Grime Scene: Social Media, Music, Creation and Consumption

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Abstract

In this paper we start to explore and unpack the work of Grime music producers and performers with a focus on their attitudes, working practices and use of social media. We explore the origins of grime and describe a complex set of interactions between people and technology in order to facilitate the production and dissemination of audio content in an evolving digital climate. We explore how individuals in this space curate and collect content, with a view to reuse in the future. We also explore how grime is evolving and ways in which technology might be able to facilitate many of these processes more effectively. Finally, we explore technological issues that pertain to music production and dissemination in its current state and implications for design for future applications and contexts.

Author Keywords

Music; Social Media Production; Ethnography; Community; HCI, Creativity; Innovation; Audio; Digital.

ACM Classification Keywords

J.4 Computer Applications - Social and Behavioural Sciences: *Sociology*.

Authenticity

One of the common features of these videos is the production of familiar imagery and language of the region as part of the media. As the genre emerged in London, music videos often feature references to iconic locations. The geographical context is deemed relevant and significant in this sense, with artists describing the feature of such imagery as, "Authentic." In the same way that products are stamped for quality, their digital stamp of authenticity is the use of visual feature within the videos. Images of the area and famous landmarks often feature in videos and some music videos are even recorded in these areas in their entirety. This offers value twofold. The visual imagery provides a sense of identity, a recognisable visual cue that signifies authenticity.

Introduction

Grime is a genre of music that emerged during the 90s, originating as a hybrid-genre containing elements of rap, hip-hop, dance, drum and bass and old school garage. The genre first become popularized through pirate radio and online, live video streaming sites such as AxeFM. These websites offered a means by which artists could stream live performances to an Internet audience, allowing interactive elements around the performance such as chat and voting. The emergence of technologies to support interactivity between musicians and audiences[2] presented new avenues for distribution and conversation. Services such as YouTube in 2005 and SoundCloud in 2007 then superseded this medium. These services emerged in the second half of the 00's and offered new video and audio-sharing platforms by which artists could share samples, beats vocal sections for critique, commentary and entertainment. The presentation of new technologies such as the iPad enabled creativity to grow within this domain[4]. SoundCloud provides a more recent offering, a space in which artists can share their work with the world and offers the opportunity to post comments in-line with audio. Unlike a top-to-bottom commentary offered by YouTube, inline commenting offers the opportunity to point to specific sections of tracks and adds an additional layer of contextual meaning to the comments. The submission and presentation of time-oriented metadata in this context consolidates the need to describe and point to sections through identifiers such as visuals or lyrics. Unlike YouTube however, SoundCloud does not afford the opportunity to upload a music video with a track. For this reason, artists typically rely on both a YouTube and SoundCloud social media profile and attach different contexts of use to the affordances of each. Though

these services offer a means by which media can be distributed and shared across the genre, these services can also be used to network, talk and share multimedia. In the same way that Facebook and Twitter offer text-sharing capabilities, YouTube offers the opportunity to upload video clips that are not primarily music content, containing elements such as lyrics or photographs. These include production processes and video logs posted to YouTube.

These mediums provided a broadcast platform for individuals making music in this space, without the financial and technical barriers to entry that are evident in traditional production models. It is no longer necessary to possess technical skills with production and distribution tools to produce and share music. Artists no longer require an affiliation with a recording label to financially support their work. Indeed, the emergence of affordable home studio technology has blurred the lines between professional producer and amateur hobbyist. Sites such as Soundcloud and file hosting services such as MediaFire offer a platform for this type of content to be distributed, shared and accessed. These venues allow artists to share their work with as many, or as few people as they choose.

The growth in popularity and connectivity of musicians in the social space has been explored at length both inside[1] and outside[6,7,10,13] the grime community. This research builds upon on our initial research into the cultural and social significance of such emergent tools and their usage in a growing community of artists in this space[3]. The work here aims initially to untangle some of the complexities around the working practices of these artists and explain how and why they use social media as part of their larger workflow. We

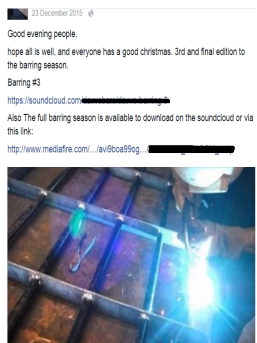


Figure 1: Sharing audio through social media using an associated graphic

Download from: <http://www.mediafire.com/>
 Follow the twitter: <https://twitter.com/>
 Category Music
 Licence Standard YouTube Licence

Figure 2: Social media content often links to profiles on other websites

also discuss the issues of provenance, ownership and copyright within a genre of music that emerged from the pirate radio and sampling scenes.

It is important not just to understand how these practices manifest, but the motivations and reasoning behind choices made. In many cases, the 'hows?' and 'whys?' are dictated by the role of the individual. We also explore attitudes about breaking social convention and how stepping outside of a particular geographically boundary can have ramifications in an online space.

As a genre of music that is grounded in geographical legitimacy, many of the discussions in the comments of these pages pertain to legitimacy and talk about how "real" the music is. The comments on these videos point to the landmarks as recognisable identifiers, parks, statues and in some cases even postcodes of the areas in which the music video is recorded. Videos have also been grouped into playlists to offer a route through the genre. Semantic tags such as #grime and more recently #grimeUK offer a means by which to search for music videos of this type of content.

Social Media

The community of grime is one largely grounded in performance over production. In many senses, the live recorded or unrecorded versions are the end product and often the versions in digital distribution. Early streaming sites for instance, offered a platform that artists could perform in front of a video camera. This performance typically manifested with two artists, standing face to face with a 16 bar looping beat playing in the background. Each artist would iterate through a series of vocals, before handing over to their counterpart to offer a reply on the 16th bar. The

handing over of the microphone plays a significant role here in offering a transition between artists and is imposed as a gesture of good will between participants. In spite of the competitive nature of these performances and often unpleasant language used in these 'battles' there are a number of conventions in place which convey respect to the genre and their counterpart. The handing over of the mic to 'respond' in this context is one important social gesture here. These 'battles' are often more light-hearted than they seem, with opponents laughing, smiling and signaling their approval. The true nature of the 'battles' is explored in a round-robin format. Here a series of experts offers a view as to which of the two individuals performed best, usually in a panel format, but sometimes crowd sourced through online chat and tweets. In this setting, the winner then progresses to battle a competitor who also defeated their adversary in a previous battle. This format offers two advantages. Firstly, the convergence of quality content takes the form of a binary search. The better performer progressing in the competition means that as time goes on in these competitions, quality is theoretically improved. When we explore more recent technological innovations, we can identify some changes in the way in which both narrative and content aggregation are changing.

Websites such as YouTube and DailyMotion offer a new platform for performance, with individual user accounts offered as a means to publish video content associated with their online persona. Many grime artists have chosen to engage in this medium within their performance art. Social media offers the opportunity to share music videos or a series of photos with backing music to a general audience quickly and easily. In some cases, artists have produced videos to match the



Figure 3: A collaborative performance, playing out in a City location



Figure 4: A music video featuring a popular location, uploaded to social media



Figure 5: Stream of comments in YouTube

narrative of the songs, including acting out the narrative. One of the common features of these videos is the production of familiar imagery and language of the region as part of the media. As the genre emerged in London, music videos often feature references to iconic locations. The geographical context is deemed relevant and significant in this sense, with artists describing the feature of such imagery as, “authentic.” In the same way that products are stamped for quality, their digital stamp of authenticity are the visual features within the videos. Images of the area and famous landmarks often feature in videos and some music videos are even recorded in these areas in their entirety. This offers value twofold. The visual imagery provides a sense of identity, a recognizable visual cue which signifies authenticity. As a genre of music that is grounded in geographical legitimacy, many of the discussions in the comments of these pages pertain to legitimacy and talk about how “real” the music is. The comments on these videos point to the landmarks as recognizable identifiers, parks, statues and in some cases even postcodes of the areas in which the music video is recorded. Videos have also been grouped into playlists to offer a route through the genre. Semantic tags such as #grime and more recently #grimeUK offer a means by which to search for music videos of this type of content.

Some tags go further as to describe the things mentioned, such as landmarks and postcodes. This attempts to align the music with geographical features related to the area rather than the music. This contextual wrapping is difficult to untangle. While the music is attached to the area through themes, concepts and search, this type of attachment only works as a one-way function. It may be that people searching for

features or postcodes are not interested in this type of music at all. While sites like YouTube offer some context in search, mostly through broad categories such as music and TV, the means by which artists offer a route to their music is self-dictated. Tagging for instance, does not rely on a uniform set of terms or features. There is no specification or best practice for tagging. Indeed, the lack of a de facto or indeed a de jure standard presents technical challenges in sorting this information and in structuring a search query.

From Social Practices to Social Spaces

Status plays an important role in social presence online. We have discussed the role of authenticity in the space; however there are a variety of other social practices which artists engage in to communicate status and opinions. Engaging with a community of fans is important in helping to drive production practice. YouTube offers a platform where artists can build up a following. Having an active profile enables an artist to build up and share a library of music. Tags on these videos enables discovery of content through contextually relevant searches. ‘Grime’, ‘GrimeUK’, ‘Bars’ and ‘Spitting’ are all examples of tags used. The wide range of terminologies used to describe this music presents a case for uniformity. However, language is often ambiguous in nature and many of these categorization problems could be solved through the use of intelligent technology such as neural networks.

Ownership and Sampling

The issue of ownership is one, which is relevant in this space. With the growth in home production tools[8] and the availability of technology within this space[14] the number of home producers is also growing. Grime could be describes as an emerging genre. Many of the

Un-following

Social practices in this space can also be powerful and allow a community of artists to define and describe status through acts. Un-following for instance, is described as “powerful” and “meaningful.” During the course of observations, a number of artists chose to un-follow one particular user on social media. The individual causing offence had travelled abroad and setup a studio in a foreign country. While the offending artist’s aim was described as, “introducing the genre of music to a new audience,” this was identified as poor practice and in poor taste. The act of un-following signified a sense of disagreement and silent protest. Authenticity plays an important role in the online presence of artists. Individuals no longer wished to be associated with such practices, as they described it, “guilty by association.”

popular artists in this space made their name on pirate radio, through online streaming services and by “spitting or barring” over familiar compositions in the genre. Digital piracy is a major issue in the music business[9,11] but we must consider the mode, methods and motivations for piracy and how this plays out in a socially, collaborative space[5,12].

In discussions with artists, they describe two major schools of thought. In the amateur and pro-amateur space, we can identify both a want and need to use pre-made content, ‘sampling.’ We will separate these contexts into two use cases herein. In the first case of needing to use pre-built content, this relates heavily to the level of technical skill of the artist. Many amateurs observed in this space do not have an understanding of musical theory or ability to play a conventional instrument. While hardware keyboards and interfaces that map computer keyboards to sounds offer a point of entry, there is a degree of learning required to master these tools. Though each amateur observed uses either a virtual or physical keyboard in their day-to-day practice, the use of instruments is largely virtual Studio Technologies¹ as a platform to integrate computer keyboards and map the keys against a digital instrument. In both cases artists rely on simple melodies to underpin or “inspire” their compositions, structured around sampled or pre-rendered content from other sources. While many of these sources are legitimate, including borrowing and sharing samples amongst friends, there is still [3] a reliance on ripping content from places like Spotify, YouTube and SoundCloud. One artist justifies this in the following way. “I’m

not comfortable making drums. I can’t move my fingers quickly enough to get the right sound and I find it hard to manually shift things on screen to make them in time.” There are also motivations, which are not driven by a lack of technical skill. Indeed, grime is a genre heavily reliant on sampling and reuse of content. While this practice has legal ramifications, it is important to recognize that it is culturally significant. Artists actively share content in the form ‘beats’, ‘samples’ and ‘bars.’ While these terminologies are interchangeable, they correspond to sources of music that often extend through multiple layers of abstraction and iteration throughout their life as a digital music object. The grime community on SoundCloud is one space wherein we can explore how content is used and reused in production and what it means to a community of users. It is a space where artists with different wants and needs can explore, find, share, collect and talk about music. Following and messaging offers a sense of interaction, where communities can grow, talk and share organically.

Conclusion

The challenges presented here may speak to two communities of practitioners in the context of information retrieval. Firstly, by recognizing imagery in the videos to automatically offer geographic, location-based information in searches. We have identified that legitimacy in this domain is questionable and verification of one of the key factors pertaining to legitimacy, location, is one way in which to mitigate this. Opportunities to search by region for instance, can act as both a tool for validation and discovery of new content through browsing rather than structured query. There is also room for standardization, sort and search options in the semantic terminology space. Perhaps the

¹ <http://www.steinberg.net/en/company/technologies/vst3.html> (2006)

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two are not mutually exclusive, where geographical information could begin to inform semantic tagging in this space, for instance, automated location tagging. Challenges also pertain to ownership and tracing. While common practice embodies a culture of sharing, the implications of such practices are less clear. Finally, we must consider how we can offer better, contextually driven systems to better inform users. Using automated technologies, we may begin to identify associated links and patterns between tracks, trace ownership and improve discoverability. This is relevant in a genre of music where Internet technologies, sampling and shifts in day-to-day practice are evident. These are indeed complex issues, where social structure and practice meets technology. The challenge here is in improving access, opportunities for discovery and allowing further control over the lifecycle of digital musical objects.

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