

BRANDING SOUND: PORTER ROBINSON, VIRTUAL SELF, AND THE
INFLUENCE OF BRAND ON MUSIC

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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This thesis investigates the branding strategies of DJ-producer Porter Robinson and his side-project Virtual Self. This project situates both brands within their generic, historical, and cultural contexts. After an introductory chapter that explains the structure and methodology of this project, Chapter II explores the Porter Robinson brand. I suggest that Robinson's branding strategy reflects Mark Samples' conception of the artist brand, pitting both him and his music against the commercial mainstream. Chapter III then considers Robinson's shift to suggesting a different branding model under Virtual Self: *interstitial branding*. The interstitial branding model allows Robinson to maintain the subcultural capital accrued under this artist brand strategy while also interacting more closely with the EDM mainstream.

This thesis contributes to the pre-existing scholarly discourse on music-branding by suggesting a continuum of commercial and anti-commercial appeals to consider what happens "in between," expanding the possibilities for future studies on music-branding.

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For Briana, whose kindness and love of music we will never forget. 1997-2018.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Electronic dance music (EDM) has gained immense popularity since it emerged out of the disco fad of the 1970's. Hundreds of annual festivals are held around the globe, drawing crowds from myriad places. DJs have usurped the old-school pop stars from their residencies in Vegas, making EDM one of Sin City's primary attractions; recently, DJ-producers have earned a few spots on Forbes's "Highest Paid Artists" list, with solo act Calvin Harris ranked 20th in 2018 (\$48 million/year) and DJ duo The Chainsmokers ranked 27th (\$45.5 million/year).¹ An economy of dance music superstardom has emerged, creating a relatively young dance music mainstream. Although DJ-producers such as Skrillex and deadmau5 have left their mark on the music industry, scholars have yet to fully investigate commercial EDM. The study at hand utilizes branding as a lens through which we can begin to understand the inner workings of contemporary EDM within the American marketplace, investigating two major acts – Porter Robinson and his side project, Virtual Self.

My interest in electronic dance music arose in early 2015, spurred on by a pair of college roommates. One of the first artists they introduced me to was Porter Robinson who had, by that point, risen to the top of the EDM industry with the release of his first LP, *Worlds* (2014). The interviews surrounding this release couched *Worlds* as an artistic project distanced from the EDM mainstream through Robinson's new, melody-focused

¹ Zack O'Malley Greenburg, "The World's Highest-Paid Musicians of 2018," Forbes, December 4, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/zackomalleygreenburg/2018/12/04/the-worlds-highest-paid-musicians-of-2018-u2-coldplay-ed-sheeran/#a914994151dc>

approach. In March of 2015, my roommates took me to see Porter Robinson's *Worlds* DJ set at a local, one-day dance music festival. Years later, as I launched into serious musicological study, Robinson announced a new side project, Virtual Self, and I found myself troubled by the interviews and social media engagement promoting this new project. I could not come to grips with many of the tensions and contradictions under the surface of the Virtual Self project; why attempt to transcend dance music as a functional music by returning to earlier styles that were strongly associated with the raves of the '90s? Why is Robinson so insistent on keeping Virtual Self at a distance from his Porter Robinson moniker, and why promote the project through his own channels if the two were to be entirely separate entities? And, what do Robinson's branding strategies tell us about the larger dance music industry? The project at hand arose out of these questions.

In this thesis, I utilize the Porter Robinson and Virtual Self split as a case study to investigate EDM branding strategies and call their consequences into question. I frame my findings within longstanding discourses of subcultural authenticity, situating Robinson's branding strategies within cultural and historical contexts particular to American EDM. I further seek to illustrate the connections between branding strategies and musical choices, using Porter Robinson's live performances as extensions of my brand analysis. I argue that these two brands coexist along a continuum of direct commercial appeal and anti-commercial sentiment, drawing on musicologist Mark Samples' conception of the artist brand as the background for my own argument.

Methodology

Samples defines an artist brand as the adoption of an "artistic persona in the press that valorizes individual artistic expression, and vilifies commercialism as destructive to

artistic integrity,” allowing artists to achieve commercial success while simultaneously framing themselves as a romantic genius.² In his dissertation, Samples addresses indie-folk artist Sufjan Stevens through the lens of the artist brand, arguing that branding offers a form of mediation between pop artists and listeners. In the study at hand, I situate Porter Robinson’s career within the same discourse as Stevens; however, Robinson adopts the artist brand in order to codify his personal artistic integrity instead of framing himself as a romantic genius.

Robinson’s employment of the artist brand falls within a varied cultural and historical context due to his position as an electronic dance music artist. Though both he and Stevens participate in discourses of subcultural authenticity, the underlying values of their subcultural realms must be properly differentiated. Previous writers such as Hugh Barker and Yuval Taylor have addressed discourses of authenticity within rock and folk music subcultures, providing an important framework for further case studies.³ In their monograph *Faking It: The Quest for Authenticity in Popular Music*, Barker and Taylor situate a wide range of artists within their particular musical cultures, identifying and interrogating markers of subcultural authenticity. The study at hand utilizes their framework in tandem with sociologist Sarah Thornton’s conception of subcultural capital to unpack both the Porter Robinson and Virtual Self brands’ appeals to discourses of authenticity. Thornton utilizes Bourdieu’s socio-economic theory of cultural capital to outline an alternative, subcultural model for social mobility, arguing that the club

² Mark Samples, “A Package Deal: Branding, Technology, and Advertising in Music of the 20th and 21st Centuries,” Dissertation (University of Oregon, 2011), 121.

³ Taylor and Barker, *Faking It: The Quest for Authenticity in Popular Music* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2007).

subculture ignores socio-economic standing in favor of economies of being “in the know.”⁴ This discourse applies to both participants on the dance floor and performers, prioritizing knowledge of the “underground,” both musically and spatially. Over time these priorities have shifted as rave and club culture has morphed into contemporary festival culture. These discourses still place emphasis on knowledge of underground music, though they often have a nostalgic bent and emphasize connections to earlier rave culture. Thornton’s study and conception prove useful here as a lens for consideration of how branding can operate within these cultural economies.

Both the indie-folk and dance music subcultures place emphasis on a do-it-yourself (DIY) ethos, emerging out of their countercultural roots. But, while folk music prioritizes the singer-songwriter persona and intensely personal lyrical expression, EDM generally must accomplish the cultural work of enlivening a dance floor. Discourses of authenticity, then, typically take place on the extramusical plane, as the music generally lacks enough linguistic content to establish and contest subcultural identities; however, as dance music shows have become increasingly complex and artists have started to release self-contained albums, dance music itself has gained importance as a site to negotiate conceptions of authenticity. These discourses are enacted not only in the music itself, but in the iconography, light design, and structure of the continuous sets (or mixes) that characterize dance music performance. EDM also carries a vastly different cultural and performative history, developing out of the highly-commercialized disco genre into a new, underground genre. Its association with the rave culture of the 1990s has cultivated

⁴ Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1996).

two primary associations for the genre – drug use and a history of “underground” performances.

Therefore, I seek to situate my own use of the artist brand concept within dance music’s particular historical and cultural context. To accomplish this, I will rely on the histories provided by several music critics.⁵ Many of these studies deal primarily with the rave culture of the 1990s, focusing on the early development of Detroit techno, Chicago House, and the transmission of these genres through British underground raves. Such studies frequently stop just after the turn of the century, when Detroit’s Movement festival was bought (and commercialized) by Ford Motor Company.⁶ A more recent historical monograph by Matthew Collin extends these studies to the current day, considering the consequences of commercialization for various historic sites for dance music.⁷ These studies tend to be difficult to verify due to a lack of citations and often do not shy away from direct appeals to subcultural concerns about selling out. Despite these flaws, I utilize these texts both to contextualize my argument historically and as examples of the subcultural discourses I seek to illustrate.

Before continuing, it is essential to note the consequences of my use of “brand,” particularly within dance music’s long and complicated relationship with the capitalist marketplace. One of my motivations for using this lens stems from Mark Samples’ writings on the deep connections between commercially produced and distributed music

⁵ See work by music critics Collin (2018), Reynolds (2012), Sicko (2010), and ethnomusicologist Dalphond (2014) for the historical background utilized here.

⁶ See Sicko (2010) and Dalphond (2014) for histories of the Detroit Movement Festival.

⁷ Matthew Collin, *Rave On: Global Adventures in Electronic Dance Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

and the system in which it operates – one that many scholars and fans have been reluctant to embrace.⁸ The marketplace has historically been treated as the antithesis to the creativity of the artistic genius, preventing artistic expression in the pursuit of profit. Both Samples and myself posit that these attitudes have aided in creating the ironically commercial artist brand, allowing artists both to dismiss commercial success and emphasize their own personal expression.

Samples has additionally outlined how the understanding of “brand” is historically and culturally bounded, illustrating his case through his studies spanning over a century.⁹ In the 1990s, dance music fans prioritized their underground knowledge and subcultural context; however, following the commercialization of the Detroit Movement Festival and the addition of a Grammy category for dance music, a mainstream dance music culture arose in the United States. While the rave subculture still has roots in earlier discourses of authenticity, the discourse has shifted in nature. Some dance music fans certainly dismiss mainstream dance music artists (usually “main stage” artists) in favor of more obscure musical acts, but even these fans often wear the logos of their favorite artists on their clothes as a method for shaping their own identity within the community. Although this work engages with the anti-commercial sentiments expressed by Robinson himself and related to discourses of subcultural authenticity, I use the term with the understanding that “branding” is not inherently negative or positive and that brand is inherently inescapable for artists who participate within the global marketplace.

⁸ Mark Samples, “A Package Deal: Branding, Technology, and Advertising in Music of the 20th and 21st Centuries,” Dissertation (University of Oregon, 2011), 5–6.

⁹ Ibid, 10–12.

This understanding is additionally rooted in the industry discourse that encourages aspiring artists to consider and take on their own branding practices; we will return to this in the conclusion.

One of the guiding questions of this project has been: what can the economic, historical, and cultural circumstances of Porter Robinson's music-making tell us about the music itself? Mark Samples has already addressed the relationship between brand and a codified album, but EDM offers a particularly engaging site for exploration of the relationship between musical branding and live performances. My analysis will both mirror and expand upon the model provided by Samples, considering how brand can inform performance decisions such as track selection and set shaping. Music theorist Mark J. Butler has set a precedent for in-depth analytical studies on EDM with two major monographs. The first, *Unlocking the Groove: Rhythm, Meter, and Design in Electronic Dance Music*, outlines methodologies for analyzing beat- or groove-based tracks and live DJ sets.¹⁰ Butler's analysis of form in techno is particularly informative for the following chapters. Through interviews with several DJs, Butler's outline of the typical form of an EDM track comprises four main components: 1. a short introduction, 2. an energy-building buildup (or "core") that is repeated and varied with each iteration, 3. a texturally-dense breakdown that releases the accumulated tension (similarly repeated and varied), and 4. a short outro (Figure 1). He identifies texture as the primary element that determines form, though he also acknowledges the role of other elements such as

¹⁰ Mark Butler, *Unlocking the Groove: Rhythm, Meter, and Design in Electronic Dance Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

rhythm.¹¹ My analysis of Porter Robinson’s tracks takes into account how he utilizes and rebels against these conventions to reify and enhance his brand narratives. Butler’s observations about multimeasure patterning and the use of hypermeasures in these tracks is also integral to our understanding, providing insight on when patterns are disrupted, elongated, or otherwise altered to achieve certain musical effects.

One key component of my argument lies in how Robinson manipulates the form of his tracks to fit within particular brand narratives. For this argument, Asaf Peres’s work on the relationship between verse-chorus song structure and the musical form outlined by Butler is instructive. Peres argues that modern pop songs are best analyzed from a standpoint that recognizes the merging of EDM track form and the verse-chorus structure, in which secondary musical characteristics such as timbre and texture delineate sections (Figure 2).¹² My own approach applies this in reverse; I will utilize this formal ambiguity to call into question Robinson’s motivations for disowning a particular track off of his seminal album, *Worlds* (2014), due to its musical and iconographic proximity to the popular consumer culture he so aggressively distances himself from. To accomplish this, I will utilize spectrograms generated in the program Sonic Visualizer, which allows us to clearly identify timbral and textural processes or effects, such as sweeps or the removal of entire rhythmic layers.



Figure 1. Butler's model of EDM track form

¹¹ Ibid, 221–229.

¹² Asaf Peres, “The Sonic Dimension as Dramatic Driver in 21st-Century Pop Music,” Dissertation (University of Michigan, 2016): 129.

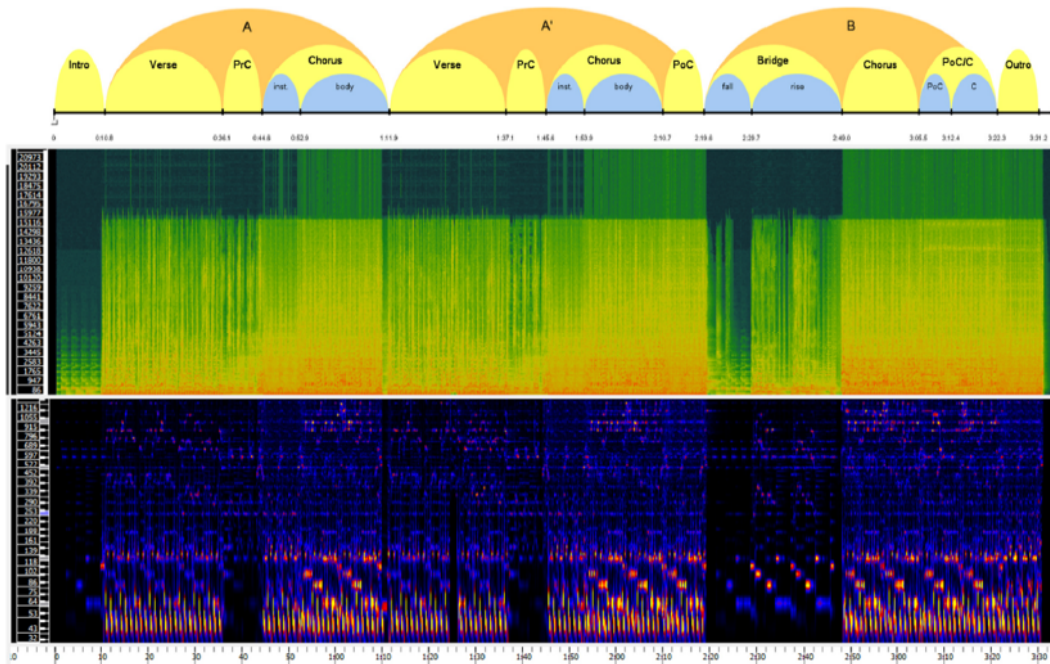


Figure 2. Peres's suggested verse-chorus formal model based on Demi Lovato's "Cool for the Summer" (2015), pg. 129

For my analyses of live performances, Butler's second monograph, *Playing with Something That Runs: Technology, Improvisation, and Composition in DJ and Laptop Performance*, proves useful. Here Butler utilizes an ethnographic approach to understanding the acts of improvisation and composition in live EDM performance, calling into question the assumed dichotomies between live and recorded music, as well as between composition and improvisation.¹³ His interviews with Berlin DJs in the early 2000s illustrate the fluidity with which the artists conceive of these activities, situating composition and improvisation on a spectrum rather than treating each activity as entirely discrete. This lens again informs my analyses of Robinson's live sets under both monikers. Under Porter Robinson his *Worlds* live performances serve as a live re-

¹³ Mark Butler, *Playing with Something That Runs: Technology, Improvisation, and Composition in DJ and Laptop Performance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

imagination of the *Worlds* album, involving less improvisation and placing more emphasis on a cohesive soundworld created by his own tracks. Robinson's performance practices diverge severely with the Virtual Self project. In the Utopia System tour sets, he mixes in tracks by other producers, re-introducing room for improvisation and emphasizing his mixing skill in performance.

Structural Overview

This thesis comprises two case studies each occupying their own chapter. These case studies are comparative in nature, interrogating how and why a single artist would create two separate artistic identities. My study further highlights the musical consequences of these brands, situating brand strategies as both economic and artistic conceptions. Chapter II considers Porter Robinson's early career and brand formation, situating his brand as a case study that follows Samples' artist brand model. I begin by outlining Robinson's early career in the dubstep subgenre, identifying the moment of and motivations for his adoption of an artist brand. The primary focus of this chapter is on his seminal LP, *Worlds* (2014); my interrogation of the brand in relation to this album considers Robinson's interactions with the press between 2014 and 2016 and the musical artifacts connected to this period, including discrete tracks from *Worlds*, iconography, and music videos. The final portion of this chapter turns to analysis of a fan-made recreation of the 2015 *Worlds* Live tour, drawing broader conclusions about the influence of brand on the construction of this set. Chapter II concludes by illustrating how Robinson creates a successful artist brand within the EDM genre, highlighting parallels and divergences from Samples' model.

In Chapter III, I argue that the success of *Worlds* and the attached artist brand limited Robinson's musical options, causing him to create a new project for artistic liberation. I then interrogate Robinson's creation and move to the Virtual Self persona, considering the potential ramifications of the artist brand strategy. I suggest a model for a different branding strategy, called *interstitial branding*, which allows the Virtual Self project to occupy a liminal space between commercial branding strategies and Robinson's anti-commercial narratives. By occupying this interstitial space, Robinson is able to re-imagine standard EDM branding practices such as anonymity and the tradition of utilizing multiple alter-egos while simultaneously maintaining his art for art's sake narrative. Once again, I consider iconography and musical consequences in tandem. In this case, the two virtual avatars created for the Virtual Self project operate not just as brand elements but also as integral factors in musical decisions and experience. The final portion of this chapter outlines the interstitial branding model through a summary of the strategies Robinson utilizes in his branding of Virtual Self, suggesting that future analyses of musical brands could benefit from consideration of branding strategies along a continuum of anti-commercial sentiment and commercial appeal.

The final chapter broadens the scope of this project, suggesting further consequences for studies of the artist brand and interstitial branding strategies. I outline potential limitations of these lenses and the study at hand. One potential flaw lies in my inability to account for audience reactions, which would require far more ethnographic work, or to provide a quantitative measure of the success of either project. Regardless, this thesis contributes to scholarly discourse on commercial music by offering a case study in which I suggest a new conception, interstitial branding. This concept should be

utilized as yet another possibility with myriad potential applications. Within electronic dance music, the interstitial branding conception might aid scholars in understanding how and why dance music artists create multiple aliases. This lens can also be applied to other genres, fruitfully investigating why bands in the metal scene, such as Woe Is Me, might not have felt the need to change their branding strategy despite a seemingly never-ending revolving door of band membership – and, whether or not their attempts to maintain a singular brand image were successful. Such studies would inform us more fully of how artists conceive and categorize the music they make, acknowledging the inherent connections and tensions between musical creation and the economy in which artists operate.

CHAPTER II

THE ARTIST BRAND, BRAND COMMUNITY, AND PORTER ROBINSON'S *WORLDS*

Introduction

In 2010, Porter Robinson released his first single, “Say My Name.” This track embodied his first stylistic period with its dubstep-influenced sound, breakneck tempo, and short, repetitive vocal samples. Fittingly, Robinson signed a contract with OWSLA, a label started by the famous dubstep artist Skrillex, after “Say My Name” made it to Beatport’s number one spot. This contract, of course, ensured that a Skrillex-influenced dubstep sound would characterize Robinson’s first EP, released the next year. *Spitfire* made its way to the 11th spot on Billboard’s dance music charts and gained Robinson his first followers. After *Spitfire*’s release, Robinson began touring globally, performing at major international festivals such as Tomorrowland in Belgium. In this early stage of his career, Robinson crafted a narrative of unintentional success, painting his career as the product of serendipitous happenstance.¹⁴ Much like indie-folk artist Sufjan Stevens, this narrative of serendipitous happenstance and the critical praise he received as a dance music *wunderkind* established a do-it-yourself ethos that would remain with him.¹⁵ The

¹⁴ This narrative is particularly prominent in his 2014 interview with Clash, in which his early success happened “as if some great deity had clapped their hands”, removing Robinson’s intention or agency. See Rob Knaggs, “New ‘World’ Order: Porter Robinson Interviewed,” Clash, November 6, 2014, <https://www.clashmusic.com/features/new-world-order-porter-robinson-interviewed>.

¹⁵ Edd Hurt, “Electro wunderkind and self-described ‘complextro’ Porter Robinson recognizes no technological constraints: Complextro, Simplified,” Nashville Scene, June

singles he released following *Spitfire* marked a moment of stylistic divergence; although he had initially made his name by spinning crowd-pleasing “bangers,” the DJ-producer teased his softer, more emotional, and lyrically-focused side with the singles “Language” and “Easy.”¹⁶

Four years later, in June of 2014, Robinson posted a Reddit Ask Me Anything teasing a new album, *Worlds* (2014). In his initial post, Robinson placed his frustration with “EDM-type stuff” at the forefront of the conversation, indicating to fans that he wanted to separate himself from the DJ and club culture that had characterized his early career. This introduction also provided links to the SoundCloud posts of two of the singles off of *Worlds*: “Sad Machine” and “Sea of Voices.” In a later response to a fan’s question, Robinson clarifies what he means when expressing his frustration with EDM. The traits he lists as undesirable include breakneck tempos, lack of melodic content, and standard buildup conventions like the addition of percussive lines at the end of a 30-second build section; ironically, all of the traits were characteristic of the style of his first EP. In this AMA, Robinson expresses his desire for “real artistic expression,” working towards a songwriting style that felt more personal to him. Through this positioning, echoed in subsequent interviews, Robinson effectively branded *Worlds* with an “anti-banger” rhetoric, intended to rebel against the relatively new EDM mainstream.¹⁷

28, 2012, <https://www.nashvillescene.com/music/article/13043794/electro-wunderkind-and-selfdescribed-complextro-porter-robinson-recognizes-no-technological-constraints>.

¹⁶ “Easy” is a collaborative track with British producer Mat Zo.

¹⁷ Porter Robinson, “i’m porter robinson, the electronic musician. AMA!,” Reddit, accessed June 10, 2018, https://www.reddit.com/r/IAmA/comments/27t6op/im_porter_robinson_the_electronic_musician_ama/.

Worlds is a quasi-concept album that, at first glance, separates itself from electronic dance music trends. Upon release under the Monstercat label, it soared to first place on the Billboard charts, and earned Robinson a larger, even more dedicated fan base.¹⁸ The songs, music videos, and album art clearly connected Robinson's brand to anime and video games, drawing on aural aesthetics reminiscent of the 8-bit music from *The Legend of Zelda*. *Worlds* truly occupied a middle ground between a concept album and an album comprising entirely discrete tracks; there is no specific underlying narrative, but the entire album is predicated on the conjuring of various fantastic worlds. The accompanying iconography, found on the album cover, in the music videos, and, ultimately, in visuals for the live performances, further enhanced this conception, tying the soundscapes of *Worlds* to pre-existing fantasy realms. Anime and video games have become inextricably intertwined with fans' reception of Robinson's music due to these connections, forming the backbone of the Porter Robinson brand identity. Additionally, these connections enabled Robinson's brand to reach communities outside of the general scope of EDM, piquing the interest of anime and video game fans.

The *Worlds* period was characterized by a flood of newly committed fans who bought into the reimagined Porter Robinson brand, culminating in the formation of a strong brand community.¹⁹ The most dedicated segment of this brand community exists

¹⁸ "Porter Robinson Chart History," Billboard, accessed September 26, 2018, <https://www.billboard.com/music/porter-robinson/chart-history/dance-electronic-albums>.

¹⁹ A brand community is a cultural group that forms around a particular brand that share core values or connections to that particular brand. Brand communities can also form in hopes of establishing individual identity, similar to the community formations ethnomusicologists and sociologists have observed within musical subcultures. For further treatment of brand communities, see Muniz, Jr. and O'Guinn (2001).

within the Facebook group “The Lionhearted ~*~Porter Robinson Family Page~*~.”²⁰ This group takes its name from “Lionhearted,” an anthem-like single off of *Worlds*. It was founded on June, 15, 2015, eight months after the album’s release. Lionhearted currently boasts nearly 7,000 members, who use the page to swap videos of performances, show off merchandise, post relevant memes, and discuss Robinson’s music. This Facebook group serves as the main organ for several other Robinson-focused groups, including a ticket exchange, a production group, and even a dating group (humorously tagged with #singlesforsenpai, recalling Robinson’s anime-focused aesthetic).²¹ A similar community exists on the r/porterrobison Subreddit, home to 18,000 members, though posts are markedly less frequent in this community than the Facebook group.²² Both groups still focus largely on *Worlds* and its associated merchandise, indicating fans’ strong attachment to the album and its subsequent performances. Robinson’s brand still draws heavily on the appeal of *Worlds*, acknowledging its favored place in the fandom.

This chapter will treat the Porter Robinson brand and his music in tandem, interrogating his’s employment of the artist brand strategy outlined by Mark Samples. Robinson is particularly meticulous about how he presents his image as an artist, carefully crafting his brand image despite claims that he prioritizes the music over

²⁰ The group is available at the following link, but requires a from submission to view any content. “The Lionhearted ~*~Porter Robinson Family Page~*~”, accessed September 26, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/TheLionhearted/>.

²¹ See the description for The Lionhearted parent group page.

²² “r/porterrobison,” accessed September 30, 2018, <https://www.reddit.com/r/porterrobison/>.

“marketing and strategy.”²³ Unlike Sufjan Stevens, Robinson’s employment of the artist brand is more concerned with narratives of artistic integrity than establishing himself as a romantic genius. Additionally, my analysis extends Samples’ considerations of the artist brand to the sphere of live performance, arguing that Robinson consciously utilizes live performances to extend his artist brand image.

The first portion of this chapter will provide an outline of the stylistic and brand shift between the *Spitfire* EP and *Worlds*. In this section I consider the shift in visual aesthetics between the two albums. Then, I comparatively analyze “100% in the Bitch,” a track off of *Spitfire*, and “Divinity,” the track that Robinson has identified as the keystone of the *Worlds* style.²⁴ The next section returns to the critical discourse surrounding *Worlds*, questioning Robinson’s dismissal of “Lionhearted”, one of his most famous tracks. I examine both the music video and the track itself, suggesting that the blatant connections to popular culture have caused Robinson to resent this track for the ways it works against his artist brand. “Lionhearted” is treated in tandem with the discourse surrounding “Fellow Feeling,” a track intended to express Robinson’s frustrations with the dance music industry. Each of these analyses of discrete tracks utilize formal manipulation as one of the key features, highlighting moments of convergence between EDM track form and verse-chorus song form. Finally, I turn to a fan-made recreation of

²³ Porter Robinson, “i’m porter robinson, the electronic musician. AMA!,” Reddit, accessed June 10, 2018, https://www.reddit.com/r/IAmA/comments/27t6op/im_porter_robinson_the_electronic_musician_ama/.

²⁴ My musical analyses draw on the frameworks established by Mark J. Butler. For clarification and further detail, see *Unlocking the Groove: Rhythm, Meter, and Musical Design in Electronic Dance Music* (2006) and *Playing with Something that Runs: Technology, Improvisation, and Composition in DJ and Laptop Performance* (2014).

Robinson's 2015 *Worlds* Live sets to consider how his brand image impacted his musical decisions. I argue that his choice to include only his own tracks, his careful construction of performance visuals, and the "live" demarcation of these performances situate Robinson as an "true artist," distancing him from the EDM mainstream. This first case study illustrates how Robinson successfully creates an artist brand within the EDM genre, illustrating considerations that allow this conception to work outside of the indie-folk genre.

Early Career and Transition to *Worlds*: Brand Aesthetics and Musical Style

Robinson created his artist brand only after his initial success as a dubstep artist. He released *Spitfire* in 2011, situating himself as a "complextro" artist whose music played with generic conventions, but remained danceable. His live shows, including his 2012 performance at Tomorrowland, were quite similar to performances by other mainstream EDM artists, focusing on crowd-pleasing "bangers" that would enliven the dance floor.²⁵ Because the narrative Robinson crafted for *Worlds* adopted an anti-banger rhetoric that was directly in conflict with the earliest portion of his career, his motivations and the aesthetic shift are worth interrogating. Here I consider both iconography and musical style, highlighting the continuity between visual and sonic brand elements. I begin by interrogating the album covers for both *Spitfire* and *Worlds*, providing a basic outline of the aesthetic shifts. The analysis that follows presents "100% in the Bitch" off of the *Spitfire* EP as an exemplar of Robinson's earlier dubstep style. I compare this directly with "Divinity," the track that Robinson cites as the progenitor of the *Worlds*

²⁵ "Banger" is a colloquial term used within the dance music community to refer to bass-heavy tracks, typically in the dubstep style, that incite crowds to dance.

style. These two tracks illustrate a shift from rhythm-driven dubstep to floating, ethereal melody lines situated within forms that straddle the divide between Butler's build-core form and verse-chorus structure. These aesthetic changes allow Robinson to adopt an artist brand, distancing him from mainstream EDM aesthetics.

The cover of Robinson's *Spitfire* EP features a silver and red industrial structure with orange dust clouds rising up against the bright blue sky (Figure 3). Two diamonds distort and mirror the original image, creating a geometric overlay. A white line of triangles sits towards the bottom of the cover. The title is in a jagged, disjoint, italicized font at the center of the album. Underneath the title is Porter Robinson's name, next to the logo of his initials that he frequently used during this period. The logo itself is a reversed P with a tail that encircles and forms the line for the R immediately next to it. The most prominent feature of the cover is its extremely vivid color palette, hinting at the aggression of the musical style with the emphasis on reds and oranges. This cover is



Figure 3. The cover of Robinson's *Spitfire* EP

largely geometric in nature, otherwise evoking an industrial landscape that mirrors the machine-like noises frequently found in the dubstep idiom. In contrast, the *Worlds* cover has a much sparser visual texture and a relatively tame color palette (Figure 4). The focal point of this cover is the purple hand at the center, holding a small cube in the center of the palm. A circle projects a line up through the middle find of the hand, highlighting the subtle geometric feature of the cube. This hand floats against a background of purple clouds in a pastel blue sky. Robinson's name sits at the top of the cover, this time without the PR logo. The title *Worlds* is directly below, though in a relatively small typeface. A distinct emoticon appears directly below the names, adopting the style of Japanese emoticons called *kaomoji*. This kaomoji occupies more space than either name, and was quickly adopted as a fan-favorite logo. The cool color palette and ethereal nature of the floating hand hint at Robinson's drastic shift in musical aesthetics; the tracks on this album seem more personal in nature, possibly reflected by the use of a hand as the primary image. Instead of being grounded in the industrial soundscape, the *Worlds* cover evokes a certain amount of freedom by placing the hand in the sky. Robinson himself is de-emphasized, as if to say that he wants to album to speak for itself instead of relying on his own star power. This visual shift matches nearly exactly with the sonic shift between "100% in the Bitch," which utilizes many of the industrial-sounding dubstep trope evoked by the *Spitfire* cover, and "Divinity," which utilizes softer synthesizer patches and a gentle vocal melody, sonically occupying the same ethereal space as the album cover.



Figure 4. Cover of Porter Robinson's Worlds

“100% in the Bitch” utilizes a fairly standard form for dance music tracks, particularly in the dubstep genre (Figure 5). The track opens with a long introduction, featuring a sample decrying “you bitch!” A falling bass sample immediately follows, and a beat reminiscent of reggaeton is established (Figure 6). This beat operates in a two-bar hypermeasure, and repeats six times before a sweep marks our arrival at a new section. The buildup then begins, with an extended sample from a YouTube video from Namasensei, a youtuber who provides free Japanese lessons. This particular sample is a humorous one, where Namasensei berates the audience for expecting a Japanese lesson, when in reality he plans to administer a test. None of the elements in the texture throughout the track are particularly melodic, instead focusing on rhythmic variation to create interest. Robinson allows this vocal sample to continue through the entirety of

Namasensei's monologue, until he warns the listener that they will keep taking the test "until [they] get 100% in the bitch," which triggers the track's first core.

The bass and snare portions of the beat resume unchanged, but the synthesizer interjections become more frequent and punctuate new portions of the beat. The texture is significantly thicker here, with much more action occurring simultaneously. At the end of every four-bar hypermeasure, the beat is punctuated by samples of Namasensei taking sips of beer and repeating "100% in the bitch." After three and a half hypermeasures, the texture is interrupted briefly by a sample declaring that Namasensei "[does] give a shit if

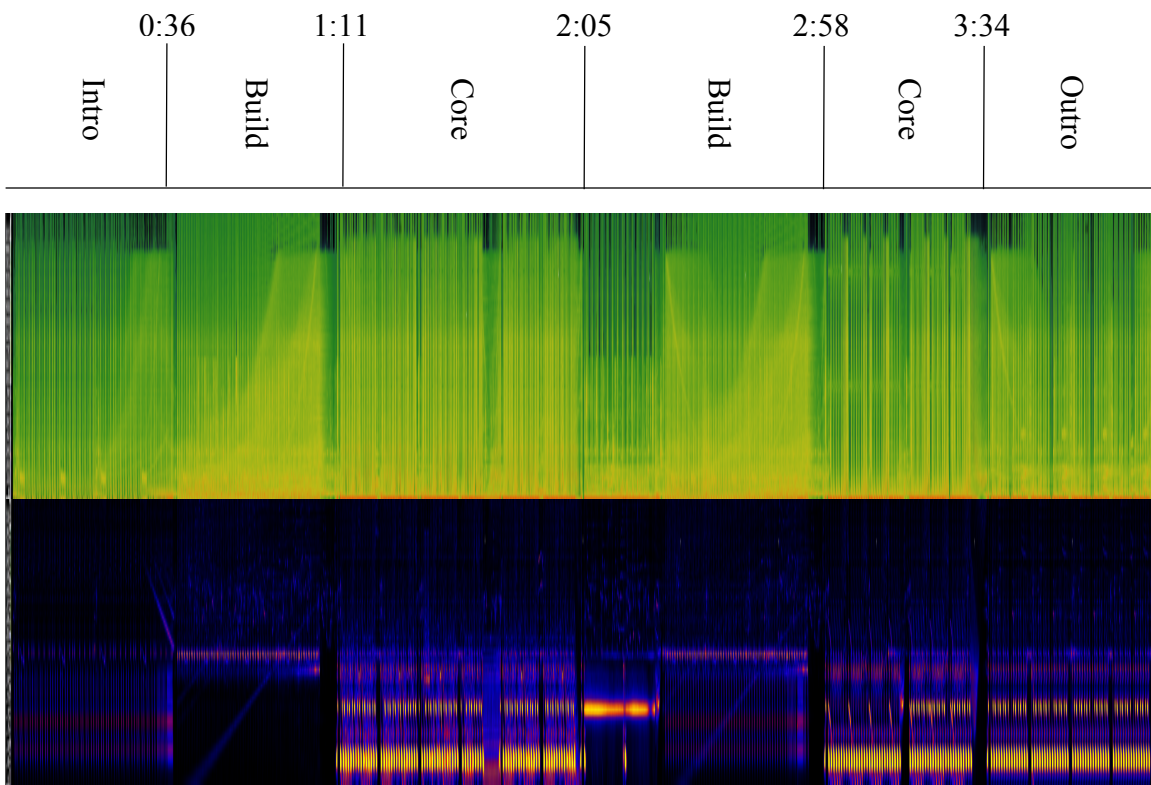


Figure 5. Formal outline of "100% in the Bitch". This model is based off of Peref's and utilizes a regular spectrogram on top (in green) with a melodic spectrogram on bottom (primarily blue). These spectrograms provide information about timbral and textural changes. The melodic spectrogram is particularly useful for identifying harmonic content, indicating what notes in the harmonic series are present at any given moment. The sections of the track are labeled above, marking where in the track each change occurs.

Beat	1	2	3	4	2	2	3	4	3	2	3	4	4	2	3	4
Snare				x				x				x		&		x
Bass	x		x		x		x		x		x		x		x	

Figure 6. One hypermeasure of the basic beat of "100% in the Bitch". The note marked "&" falls on the second eighth note of that beat.

you drink beer, so do it!" Underneath this sample is yet another accelerating and crescendoing rhythmic sweep, which reinitiates the initial pattern. Yet another build begins, remarkably similar to the first. This time, however, the core of the song is varied, beginning with a falling tom sample and wet bass drum hits marking every beat. A pitched sample provides the primary timbral interest here, coordinating and spanning the same time as the bass drum hits. The new core repeats twice before coming back to the texturally dense iteration of the core, which repeats for two and a half measures before a sample again spins out of control, with "you bitch" marking the beginning of the outro. The original beat returns with chopped vocal samples floating overtop, and plays out until the end of the song.

"100% in the Bitch" has a host of characteristics that make it ideal for mixing in a dubstep set. The outro, with its fairly sparse texture and hypermetric repetition, is ideal for layering as a DJ transitions to another track. The consistent harmonic structure and slight variances also make it relatively easy to fit with another track. The clear textural and timbral delineation between sections also makes this track ideal for mixing in a set. Butler identifies each of these traits as standard practice, and they certainly fall in line

with the structures commonly utilized by mainstream EDM artists.²⁶ The spectrograms clearly illustrate the rhythmic nature of “100% in the Bitch”, as each sound has a clear attack and decay. Although the frequent rhythmic variation may align this track with Robinson’s earlier “complextro” designation, “100% in the Bitch” is clearly designed with a dancing audience in mind, placing the practical considerations that Robinson would later deride at the fore.

In contrast, “Divinity” serves as an exemplar of the more “personal” *Worlds* style. It has been cited by Robinson himself as the progenitor of the style, and analysis reveals several characteristics that characterize the style a majority of the tracks on *Worlds*.²⁷ “Divinity” is a track at 90 bpm, which is much slower than the standard 120 bpm tempo characteristic of dubstep. The form is a bit closer to verse-chorus structure than the tracks off of *Spitfire*, often with vocal lines that distort the proportions of build and core sections (Figure 7). Melody takes priority throughout, moving away from the beat-centered sound of tracks like “100% in the Bitch.” “Divinity” begins with short introduction that introduces the hook, which is a chopped-up vocal melody occupying a four-bar hypermeasure. At the build, the tom introduces a simple drum beat that repeats throughout the track, with bass drum notes on beats 1 and 3 and snare drum on 2 and 4.

A buildup immediately follows this introduction. Like a typical build the texture thins, though in this case Robinson prioritizes the piano harmonization and vocal line. He gradually adds elements to the textures until synthesizer swells mark the final build to the

²⁶ Mark Butler, *Playing with Something That Runs: Technology, Improvisation, and Composition in DJ and Laptop Performance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014) 48–51.

²⁷ Porter Robinson, *Worlds Commentary*, Track Number 1 on *Worlds Commentary*, 2014, Spotify.

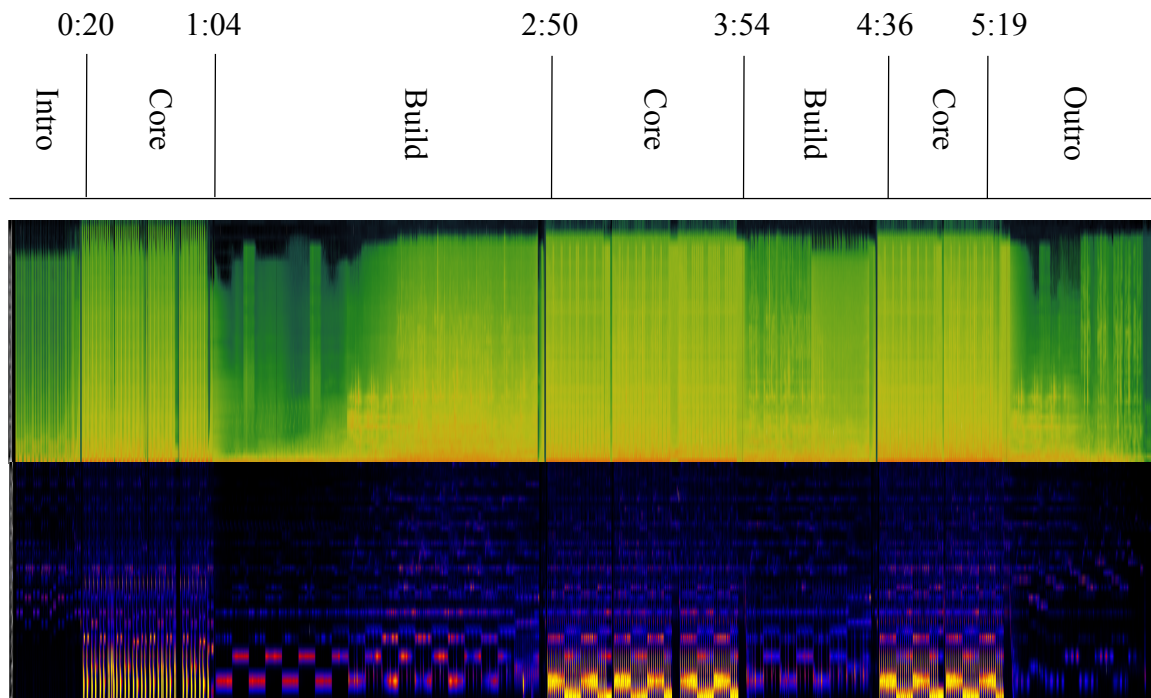


Figure 7. Formal outline of "Divinity"

next core. As illustrated in Figure 7, this build section is remarkably long, occupying much of the first half of the track. A brief, measure-long pause punctuated only by a snare hit on beat four breaks the hypermetric phrasing, leading to the first reiteration of the core. This time he foregoes the original chopped-up vocal sample in favor of a new synthesizer line that accompanies Milan's vocal line. The build section returns, significantly truncated and moving into the final iteration of the core relatively quickly. This last core section combines the elements emphasized in the first two iterations; the chopped-up vocal melody is now layered on top of the texture of the second core. The track ends with an outro again placing Milan's vocal line at the forefront, with harmonic accompaniment in the background. This ending is gentle, with the sound slowly fading out once the track ends.

Robinson's drastic shift in aesthetics is striking; while his *Spitfire* album primarily comprises bangers, "Divinity" displays a much softer side of his writing with its focus on melody and harmony. This sound rebels against the aesthetics of mainstream EDM, especially the dubstep boom that launched Robinson's career.²⁸ Unlike dubstep tracks, which are un-singable due to their emphasis on timbral contrast over melodic variation, the tracks on *Worlds* are easily singable. In fact, only three tracks on the album do not place a vocal (or vocaloid) melody at the forefront of the texture.²⁹ This choice differentiates the *Worlds* album from mainstream EDM by emphasizing vocal or vocal-like melodies over rhythmic variation. In many ways, Porter's retreat from his earlier dubstep sensibilities and his anti-banger rhetoric appealed to ravers' subcultural concerns with selling out; by positioning himself as staunchly anti-commercial Robinson garnered subcultural capital while simultaneously maintaining a sense of artistic integrity. His shift from styles that he considered "functional," like dubstep, to his mellow, songwriter-like style allowed him to position himself as an artist first instead of a DJ; however, this transition was not seamless. He would continue to struggle with his identity as an artist, continually re-framing his own work in the public eye.

The Case of "Lionhearted": Industry Frustration and Robinson's Response

Later in 2014, Robinson released a *Worlds Commentary* album on Spotify to provide his dedicated fans with further insight into his creative process. Although the

²⁸ "The Mainstream Rise and Fall: A Timeline of EDM," Magnetic, April 6, 2016, <https://www.magneticmag.com/2016/04/the-mainstream-rise-and-fall-a-timeline-of-edm/>.

²⁹ Vocaloids are voice synthesizers first popularized in Japan. Robinson uses a Avanna, an English vocaloid, on several tracks off of *Worlds* including "Sad Machine".

online brand community “Lionhearted” as their namesake, the track is notably absent.³⁰ Similarly, in his 2015 interview with online magazine Cuepoint, Robinson refuses to discuss the track; interviewer Mike Pizzo asks, but only receives a brief nod to Urban Cone’s vocal contributions before Robinson indicates that he would rather talk about other tracks.³¹ As of yet, the only interview I have found in which Robinson discusses “Lionhearted” in any detail is in a short YouTube interview with Radio.com.³² This interview only provides two additional pieces of information: an anecdote about the recording process in a small, day-use studio, and that the lyrics are supposed to depict an alien invasion. His reluctance to discuss “Lionhearted” in depth signals his deep-seated resentment for this particular track despite, or perhaps because of, its immense popularity. The following section provides an analysis of this track and its music video, noting their proximity to broader popular culture. I suggest that this proximity works against Robinson’s artist brand narrative, potentially leading to his dismissal. I also present an analysis of the track “Fellow Feeling” as evidence of Robinson’s frustration with the wider culture industry. Through my analysis of these two tracks I seek to illustrate Robinson’s negotiation of his new artist brand. While “Lionhearted” conflicts

³⁰ Porter Robinson, *Worlds Commentary*, 2014, Spotify.

³¹ Mike “DJ” Pizzo, “Porter Robinson Reflects On *Worlds* One Year Later,” Medium, October 15, 2015, <https://medium.com/cuepoint/porter-robinson-reflects-on-worlds-one-year-later-4b06f49f43f2>.

³² Radio.com, “Robinson on Video Games and Breaking down Tracks from His Debut Album, ‘Worlds,’” YouTube, August 11, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UiRDqYxPSig>.

with his new identity, “Fellow Feeling” embodies Robinson’s anti-commercial sentiment. Both tracks can inform our reading of Robinson’s brand and performances.

Of the tracks included on *Worlds*, “Lionhearted” most closely adopts the verse-chorus structure commonly used in other popular genres, superimposing this structure on EDM track form (Figure 8).³³ The track begins with a verse-like section that functions as an introduction; here, the vocal line recorded by Urban Cone begins. This section also establishes the primary synthesizer line found throughout the track. This section quickly gives way to the anthem-like chorus:

*They broke the walls we guarded
But we don't care about it
We'll finish what we started
So promise me that
We'll be the lionhearted
For we don't care about it
We'll finish what we started
So promise me they'll fall*

The texture underneath the chorus clears, indicating that this section also functions as a buildup in EDM track form. Robinson slowly adds layers to increase the tension as he approaches the core. At the core a drum beat is reinstated, taking precedence over the vocal line for the first time. The core is relatively short, repeating its hypermetric structure only four times.

The next portion of the track adheres more closely to verse-chorus song structure, moving quickly through a verse to another iteration of the chorus, finally arriving at an extended bridge section. About halfway through this bridge Robinson initiates the final build, bringing the lyrics from the chorus back for one brief iteration. This last core is

³³ Mark Butler, *Unlocking the Groove: Rhythm, Meter, and Design in Electronic Dance Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

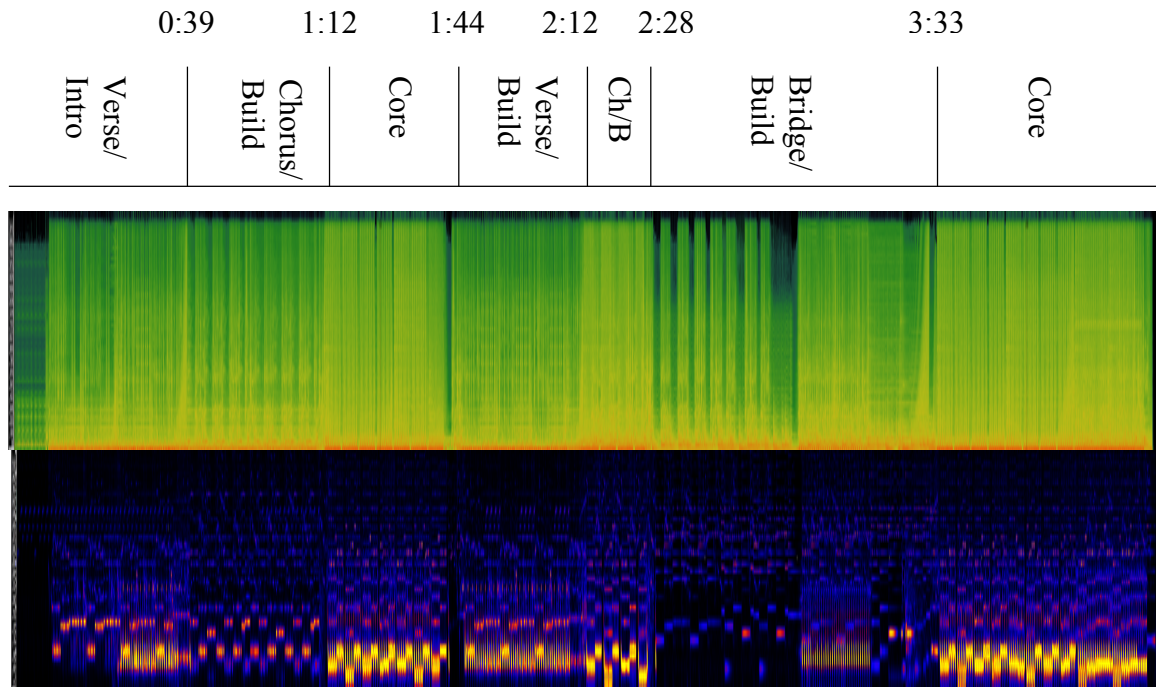


Figure 8. Formal outline of "Lionhearted" noting the combination of verse-chorus and build-core structures. (Nota bene: Ch/B is shorthand for Chorus/Build)

extended quite a bit, though most of the changes occur in the harmonic line instead of the rhythmic or melodic lines. Robinson again brings back the chorus for one statement at the end of the track, entirely foregoing an outro. The decision to omit the outro and to structure such a significant portion of the track around the form of the lyrics certainly distances "Lionhearted" from mainstream EDM, but also makes this track difficult to mix into a live DJ set. Moreover, this level of formal superimposition deviates from the remainder of the *Worlds* album, which similarly plays with formal ambiguity but tends to align more closely with build-core form. These musical characteristics render "Lionhearted" ideal for radio play, a trait that Robinson may have wanted to avoid given his new artistic persona. Such close imitation of highly popular form could damage Robinson's artistic integrity, running the risk of marking him as a sell-out.

The “Lionhearted” music video similarly appeals to popular culture, potentially working against Robinson’s artist brand narrative. This video utilizes Robinson’s star power, placing his identity at the forefront as the protagonist. The realm of this video is undeniably the real world, a decision that is strikingly different from the videos for two other *Worlds* tracks, “Sad Machine” and “Flicker.” These other videos play with the concept of fantasy worlds, either taking place in an entirely fictional world or morphing real landscapes with a host of fantastic elements. The “Lionhearted” music video also differs from these videos in its use of a tangible narrative. The opening depicts Robinson, holding a sledgehammer, and his companions in various rooms of a rundown house. As they gather in the living room to leave, the girls pick up various weapons stashed around the house. They begin to make their way down the street, and Robinson visually articulates the arrival of the core by taking a sledgehammer to the wall of a building.

The next sequence features Robinson and the girls destroying various objects around the city, aiming guns at the camera, and donning face masks bearing Robinson’s signature kaomoji (Figure 9). As they strike each building, fantastic colors shoot up the side, indicating that this violence could also be a forceful utopian reimagining. The group then bikes across the city, arriving at another metropolitan area. Porter points forward, supposedly directing his girl gang to do his bidding elsewhere. The shot then cuts to Robinson overlooking the city in a tall skyscraper, a visual framing strikingly reminiscent of the iconic final scenes of *Fight Club* (Figure 10). At the final iteration of the core, the girls return to the building and shoot Robinson. We again cut between the girls, who continue to destroy the city, and Robinson, who is lying in a puddle of his own blood on



Figure 10. Robinson and a group of young Japanese girls roam the city, armed



*Figure 9. Robinson looks over the city in a room atop a skyscraper. This scene is reminiscent of the final scene in the cult-classic movie *Fight Club*, in which The Narrator stands with his girlfriend, Marla. Shortly afterwards, the two die in a bombing.*

the floor. The video ends with one of the girls firing a bazooka at the building Robinson is in, and the video feed suddenly cuts out to static as the final chord sounds.

Visually, the only ties between this video and the other videos are the occasional CGI overlays on buildings or objects that Robinson or the girls physically influence. Instead of evoking an unfamiliar, ethereal world, the American flags and English street signs visually ground Robinson's American audience in familiar territory, presumably New York. The concrete nature of these decisions and seemingly direct reference to *Fight*

Club distance the “Lionhearted” music video from the bulk of the *Worlds* aesthetic. Considered in tandem with the mainstream sound of “Lionhearted”, this video actively works against Robinson’s claims to artistic integrity, directly appealing to consumers of popular culture. I suggest that Robinson’s dismissal of “Lionhearted” in the public eye stems from his anxieties over these contradictions. In order to maintain his own artistic integrity, he chooses to redirect fans’ focus to the portion of his output that he identifies as more representative.

One of the tracks Robinson has emphasized in public commentary is “Fellow Feeling,” which he situates as his response to mainstream EDM. He describes this track as a “techno monster” created to express his deepest frustrations with contemporary heavy bass tracks at 128 bpm – in other words, bangers.³⁴ Although his commentary particularly notes that his renunciation of dance music is not meant to serve as his complete dismissal of his earlier output, he simultaneously selects two pre-*Worlds* tracks – “Easy” and “Language” – to emphasize in his public discourse. Robinson’s comments about “Fellow Feeling” and his musical representation of the “ugliness” of EDM provide us with further evidence on the musical characteristics Robinson intended to distance himself from with his artist brand.

If “Lionhearted” is the closest track to standard pop form, “Fellow Feeling” is the furthest from it. The form does not readily map on to either verse-chorus structure or build-core (Figure 11). The track opens with two-minute introduction featuring synthesized strings. As the introduction progresses Robinson layers more string sounds,

³⁴ Porter Robinson, *Worlds Commentary*, Track Number 10 on *Worlds Commentary*, 2014, Spotify.

eventually adding a countermelody and additional harmonies. Eventually a rhythmic synthesizer line indicates small beat divisions, rectifying the ambiguity of the long-note string melody; however, a full drum beat does not enter until the build. As the build progresses a female narrator speaks, beginning a monologue that continues over the remainder over the track. Robinson removes all other elements from the texture as she asks the listener to hear what she hears, signaling our arrival at a new formal section.

The next section, the core, deviates drastically from the ethereal, trance-like soundworld that Robinson established in the beginning of the track. Aggressive, fuzzy bass synthesizers establish the beat, constantly morphing as the core progresses. Traces of what might be a rhythmically disjunct melody occasionally interject, but the texture is too varied throughout for the listener to get their footing. The core fizzles out as the narrator pleads the listener to “let [her] explain... this ugliness... this cruelty... this repulsiveness”. She proceeds to promise us this will all die out as a new section begins.

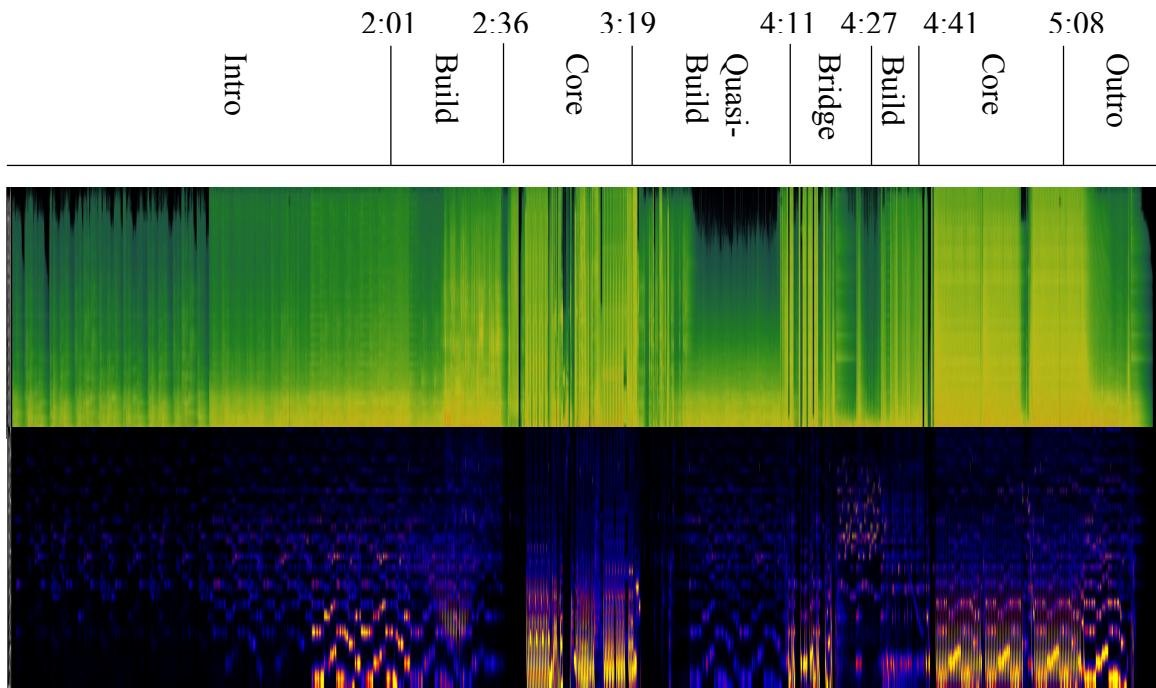


Figure 11. Formal outline of "Fellow Feeling"

This next section is particularly ambiguous; it seems to be a build, adding layers and increasing the intensity of the music in anticipation of some kind of release, but our expectations are thwarted. Instead, a piano interlude begins, functioning as a short bridge before the real build arrives. In the final core the synthesizer melody and mellow drum beat finally provide the euphoric release of tension Robinson has teased throughout the entire track. The ugliness presented in the first core is nowhere to be heard, and beauty has won. The track concludes with the same orchestral synthesizer line from the introduction, rounding out Robinson's musical narrative.

As Porter notes on the commentary album, the lyrics and music of this track read quite literally.³⁵ He promises his listener that he will rid his own music of the ugly, bass-heavy bangers that he previously produced. Although he staunchly claims that he is not renouncing his own earlier music by renouncing dance music as a functional music, both his commentary and the musical evidence in "Fellow Feeling". Only two and a half years after the release of *Worlds*, Robinson would further confirm this reading. On January 23, 2017, he tweeted a screenshot of a Spotify playlist captioned "no disrespect but this is the canon... everything else is unofficial now... i've been making music for 12 years and i only wrote 11 songs, wow".³⁶

In contradiction to his statement's implication that his earlier work would not be obfuscated in favor of his new sound, the only three tracks released prior to *Worlds* that

³⁵ Porter Robinson, *Worlds Commentary*, Track Number 11 on *Worlds Commentary*, 2014, Spotify.

³⁶ Porter Robinson, "no disrespect but this is the canon... everything else is unofficial now... i've been making music for 12 years and i only wrote 11 songs, wow," Twitter, January 23, 2017, <https://twitter.com/porterrobinson/status/823691053047881729?lang=en>.

made the list are “Language,” “Easy,” and “The Thrill – Porter Robinson Remix”; not a single track from *Spitfire* is included. “Lionhearted” is also notably missing. Stylistically, the only tracks that contain a hint of his bass-heavy style are “Language,” “The Thrill,” “Goodbye to a World” (only at the outro), and “Fellow Feeling,” which utilizes its bass-heavy core to criticize mainstream bass music. A majority of the tracks included in this list focus on exactly the musical elements emphasized in “Divinity,” including extended melodic lines and emphasis on harmonic change over rhythmic variation. This canon exemplifies the musical style Robinson associates with his artist brand, highlighting the tracks that most closely reflect his goal of artistic integrity. The same impulses that lead Robinson to form this canon under his Porter Robinson moniker also directly influenced his set construction. The remainder of this chapter explores the connections between Robinson’s artist brand narrative and his *Worlds* live performance, extending this framework beyond the recorded musical artifact.

***Worlds* Live: Performing Brand**

In 2016, I watched Porter Robinson’s *Worlds* Live set for the first time at Seattle’s Bumbershoot festival. By this time, attending the *Worlds* Live set was akin to making a fandom pilgrimage. Although I had seen Robinson’s *Worlds* DJ set a year prior, there was a distinct anticipation that characterized the days leading up to the *Worlds* Live experience. Robinson was scheduled to appear in the Key Arena at the center of the festival. My friends and I queued up alongside a multitude of other fans who were willing to wait hours in the heat to gain entry to the arena’s floor level. After nearly three hours of waiting to enter the arena, we shuffled onto the floor and danced to the immediately preceding act. Finally, it was time for the *Worlds* experience. Excited mutters spread

through the crowd like wildfire and excitement built as we all waited in anticipation, asking each other if we thought the next section would deviate at all from the videos we had previously watched.

This live experience is not unusual for Porter Robinson fans. Familiarity with recorded *Worlds* sets is typical; there is a subcultural economy of concert videos on the Lionhearted Facebook page. Live performances are just as integral to the fan experience as the recorded album. Super fans are intimately acquainted with all of the mutations of the *Worlds* Live sets over the past five years. Robinson's purposeful inclusion of only his own tracks in *Worlds* Live sets creates a unique live experience, both recreating and reimagining the *Worlds* album in real time. My analysis of *Worlds* Live will rely on a fan-made visual recreation of the 2015 sets, which is accorded a special status amongst the fandom.³⁷ This video is a compilation of fan-recorded video of 2015 *Worlds* Live performances, and is generally regarded as the closest approximation of the live experience. Although the visual element is stitched together from a variety of *Worlds* Live performances, the video is largely representative of the concert experience.³⁸ Although this video captures a specific moment in the life of the *Worlds* Live set, and certainly does not account for all of the alterations made over the last five years, it is

³⁷ Huntrox Music, "Porter Robinson – Worlds: The Movie [FANMADE]," YouTube, September 6, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8SZIvzdxcnE&t=1990s>

³⁸ This particular video, as a fan-made compilation of a multitude of *Worlds* Live performances, is occasionally questionable as far as the accuracy of the audio-visual coordination, as the visuals for each show were cued from the DJ table through specially-designed mechanisms to ensure that visual elements were precisely aligned with each night's musical events. For more on this, see DJ Pangburn, "An Inside Look At Porter Robinson's Electrifying 'Worlds' Tour Visuals," *Vice*, September 24, 2014, https://www.vice.com/en_au/article/aenv5b/an-inside-look-at-porter-robinsons-electrifying-worlds-tour-visuals.

worth consideration here as it represents Robinson's performances at the height of his post-*Worlds* success. The analysis at hand will consider the full live experience, exploring the interaction between the musical and visual elements throughout the show as they relate to brand. I argue that Robinson utilized this carefully curated live experience to reinforce his artist brand, maintaining his artistic integrity throughout all portions of the musicking process.

This live experience takes us through the various worlds conjured by the album. Video game aesthetics and references are placed at the fore, but there are also plentiful references to anime or other kinds of fictional lands. There is no overarching narrative – the protagonists that appear onscreen frequently change, as do the landscapes they reside in – but the set is still cohesive, almost adopting the narrative structure of a stream-of-consciousness novel. Some characters are reoccurring through the set, typically tied to a certain musical aesthetic, but others are confined to a singular appearance within one of the worlds. This quasi-narrative content works in tandem with musical decisions throughout the set to craft an entirely new version of *Worlds*; Robinson has carefully curated the visuals and music to artistically differentiate *Worlds Live* from the standard concert experience.

The introduction begins with a single note, coordinated with a single flashing dot onscreen, which is soon replaced by the kaomoji. The tagline of “Sad Machine,” “she depends on you” slowly infiltrates the background of the texture and a feminine anime face appears onscreen. As more musical elements from “Sad Machine” slowly appear in the texture, the visuals shift to a Japanese pagoda levitating on a chunk of earth. When the melodic synthesizer line signals the start of the track itself, world-building planes

reminiscent of video games such as Minecraft are coordinated with each note, alternating between five positions across the screen (Figure 12). As the remainder of the track plays out, the visuals depict a character in a white t-shirt extending their arm in longing as various landscapes flash across the screen. For the song's chorus, Robinson himself takes up the microphone and sings along with Alanna, the vocaloid on the original track. At the end of the chorus/buildup, the vocaloid is left to say the line "I'll depend on you" that signals the core, as the text appears onscreen as though the dialogue box of a video game non-playable character (NPC) has popped up (Figure 13). These video game references are reinforced by a musical quote from "Saria's Song," a well-known track off of the soundtrack for the *Legend of Zelda* game series. Robinson ends his live edit by playing a new underlying synthesizer line, utilizing a timbre that also recalls earlier video game soundtracks.

Although Robinson's live edit of "Sad Machine" primarily maintains the same harmonic and textural elements of the original track, the edit of "Flicker" that immediately follows diverges drastically from the album version. Initially, only the



Figure 12. Empty terrain planes from the introduction (3:13)

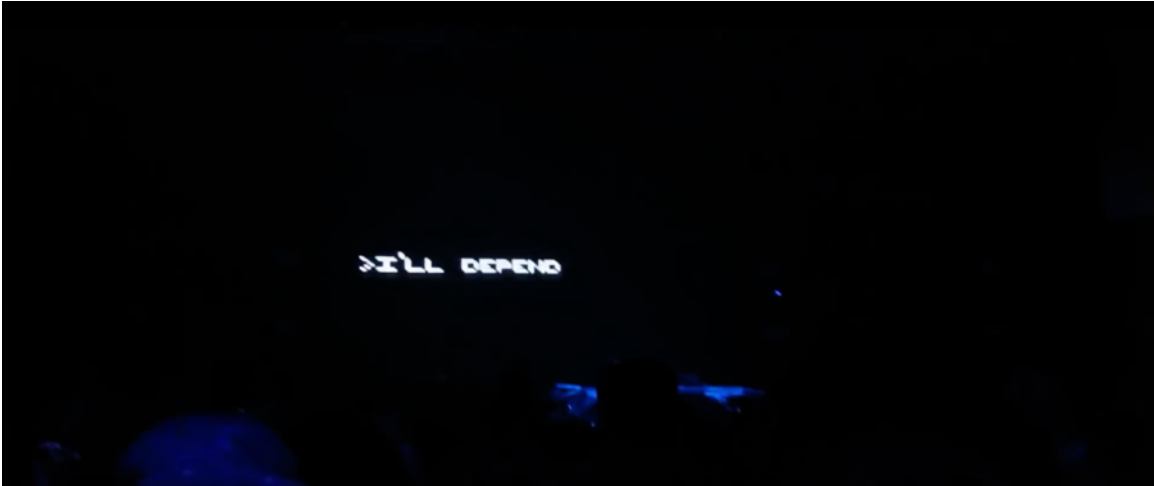


Figure 13. Partial text from the "I'll depend on you" graphic displayed during "Sad Machine" (5:13)

vocaloid's Japanese line appears with a bass synthesizer motive underneath. When the vocaloid announces the track, the word "Flicker" appears onscreen, and the iconic guitar riff and vocal melody begin, though Robinson plays a new harmonic accompaniment live on a keyboard.³⁹ The visuals throughout this re-harmonized portion alternate between an anime cat girl, kaomojis, and a screen filled with 3D robotic characters. These visuals disappear when the original texture of "Flicker" appears, changing to display the music video. Towards the end of the live edit, visuals of an animated protagonist within an imaginary world once again appear, though the landscapes and character are different than those that appeared at the beginning of the set. Images of a 3D hand reminiscent of the album cover float towards the audience in two rows immediately before the track's conclusion, subtly but intentionally evoking the Porter Robinson brand (Figure 14).

³⁹ It is worth noting that this set cannot be precisely categorized as either a laptop set or a PA set, at least as the categories are outlined by Mark Butler. Although Robinson performs portions of the set "live" on instruments that are likely to be found in his studio, he utilizes these instruments to add new elements to the cued portions of the pre-existing tracks, not to recreate the track itself.



Figure 14. "Flicker" hand graphic (16:04)

The next two tracks in the set are not tracks off of *Worlds*, but fit soundly with the style and align with Robinson's later self-canonization. The first is "Easy," a collaborative track produced with Mat Zo. The graphics throughout this live edit are taken directly from the music video, which was produced in an anime style. Much of the musical material is largely unchanged, with only a few major edits occurring towards the end, including an added house beat that closes the track. The next track is Porter's remix of Nero's "The Thrill." Again, this track remains in nearly its original form, with the exception of a slightly altered outro. He mixes these tracks early in the set amidst some of the album's most iconic tracks, utilizing them as key components of the *Worlds* Live set. Robinson follows these tracks with "Sea of Voices," pulling back the energy level. This is the third and final track to appear nearly unaltered. Here, video game-influenced visuals again dominate the screen. Instead of scrolling text that merely suggests video game dialogue boxes, here an actual dialogue box appears onscreen (Figure 15). So far this is the clearest visual video game reference, immediately evoking the 8-bit style of

1990s roleplaying games (RPGs). The lyrics to “Sea of Voices” become the game dialogue, appearing onscreen as the Avanna vocaloid sings.

Despite his distancing from the *Spitfire* aesthetic, Robinson follows “Sea of Voices” with two tracks from the EP - “Unison” and “Spitfire.” Both tracks are wildly reimagined; their dubstep cores are nowhere to be found. Instead, their melodic synthesizer lines are emphasized. “Unison” maintains the same drum beat and harmonic accompaniment during the build, but Robinson adds a new vocaloid line to his live mix of “Unison.”⁴⁰ These new lyrics semantically tie “Unison” to the *Worlds* narrative, informing listeners that their own mind is a world in itself. The words again appear onscreen as the vocaloid speaks, imitating a video game speech box (Figure 15). He also briefly mixes in a portion of the synthesizer melody from “Language” and vocal snippets from “Easy”, again re-contextualizing the primary track within his *Worlds* period.

Robinson does drop “Spitfire”, the title track off of his EP, but alters it drastically. The core is omitted and the synthesizer line is chopped and screwed. Because he has

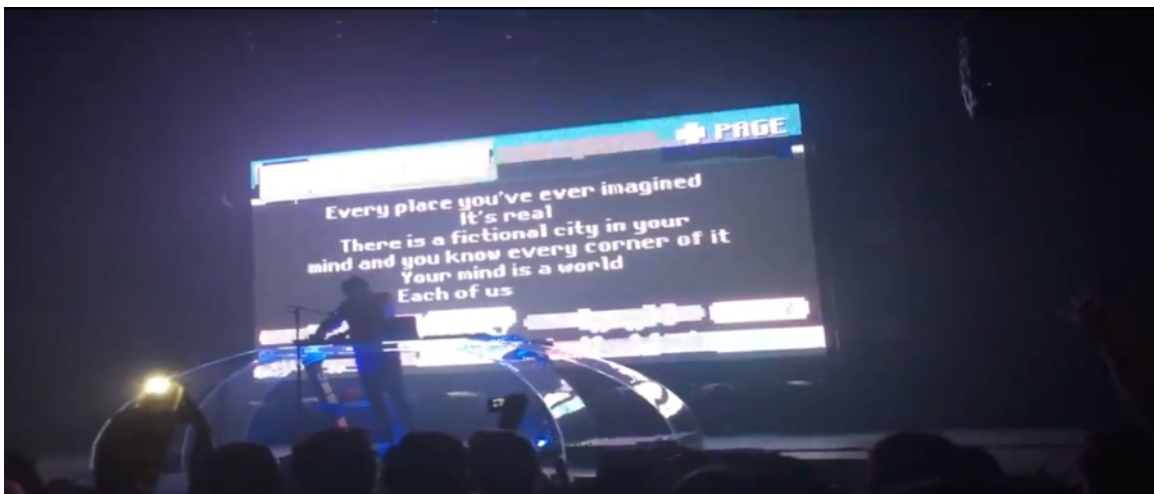


Figure 15. Vocaloid text from “Unison” (33:10)

⁴⁰ This vocaloid is not the AVANNA vocaloid utilized throughout *Worlds*. The difference in accent indicates that he chose a different vocaloid program for this live mix.

omitted the core from “Spitfire,” the transition to “Fresh Static Snow” is a stark juxtaposition. Here, Robinson uses only the core, immediately emphasizing the heavy bass line and lack of melody throughout the core of the original track. Visually, he also introduces one of the most iconic characters from *Worlds Live*, a green moose-man whose image alternates with a demon-like ox skull (Figures 16 and 17).⁴¹ This remix digresses into a future bass remix of “Sad Machine” with a punchy bassline. Eventually, an entirely new melody replaces both the “Fresh Static Snow” and “Sad Machine” melodies. Immediately after this regression he returns to the introductory section once more before transitioning to the original vocaloid melody. Here, an animated couple appears onscreen in various settings for the remainder of the track. After a brief improvisatory section that chops and screws the word “same” from the vocaloid melody, he plays “Divinity” out with similar anime-style visuals.



Figure 16. Green moose man visual from "Fresh Static Snow" (38:53)

⁴¹ This particular iteration resembles one of the mythological *shinigami*, Gozu. He has the head of an ox and the body of a man and serves as guard to the gates of hell. It could also be a nod to another Japanese *yokai*, the *ushioni*, which can also have the head of an ox and the body of a man. While their face covered in flesh in earlier iconography, the ox-skull version appears frequently in anime.



Figure 17. Ox skull figure from "Fresh Static Snow" (38:41)

In the transition between “Divinity” and “Years of War” Robinson halts the flow of the set. A name selection screen appears behind him, and video game sound effects accompany him as he types “Porter” into the dialogue box (Figure 18). Once his name is entered, Robinson signals the start of the next track with a sample of the fairy sprite Navi from the *Legend of Zelda* video game series, again referencing 1990s RPGs. He kicks off “Years of War” with an entirely new introduction, focusing on a new drum beat at the fore of the texture. Robinson also plays with the hypermetric structure in this introduction, playing the first half of the melodic phrase (two measures), then interrupting it with a single measure of the drum beat before he introduces the full melodic line. Just before a new bridge section, an anime girl appears onscreen and invites the audience to follow her up a floating staircase.

He then shifts to “Say My Name,” his first single, after a brief synthesizer transition section. Instead of 128 bpm, the live edit slows the track down to 90 bpm and only draws material from the tranquil, ethereal break section. Once again, Robinson removes any trace of the dubstep core from one of his early releases, re-contextualizing it

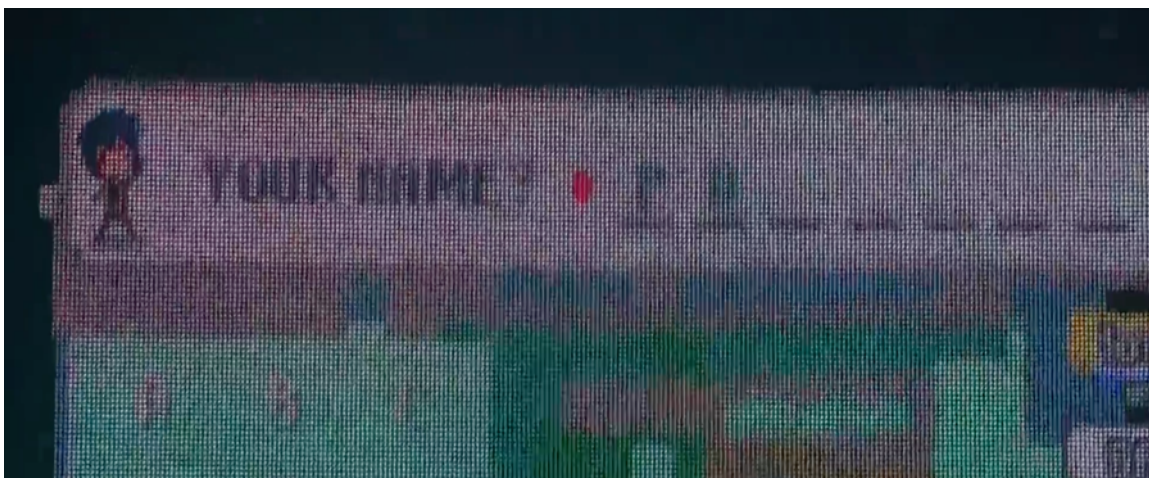


Figure 18. Name entry box visual (50:02)

to fit more soundly within the *Worlds* period. He mixes this track into “Fellow Feeling,” reimagining the string introduction with a live keyboard arrangement. The green moose-man and ox-headed monster reappear, slowly approaching a lake that resembles the Great Fairy Fountain from the *Legend of Zelda*. When the narrator from the original track asks the audience to hear what she hears, Robinson re-iterates the opening statement, this time cuing the original violin synthesizer line. While this plays out, the moose-man contemplates his reflection in the lake, which is revealed to be the ox-headed monster. The second time she beckons for the audience to hear what she hears the hard-hitting bassline from the original cores in “Fellow Feeling” is reinstated, and the visuals switch to screens that appear glitchy, with no clear imagery. Throughout this section, the voice says “let me explain,” signaling new musical ideas. The second time she asks the audience to let her explain, Robinson plays a new beat on the electric drum kit. The imagery remains glitchy with the exception of an 8-bit hand flipping the audience off on one of the longest tones. Robinson extends the original outro, punctuating various musical sections with additions or improvisations on the drum kit. The final section

returns the set to a euphoric state despite the tension created by the aggressive interruptions characteristic of “Fellow Feeling.”

Robinson again interrupts the flow of the set with a brief Japanese phrase, instructing the audience to remain calm and informing them that they will become friends with the voice. He performs the first portion of the track in its original form with accompanying anime graphics, but changes to a future bass remix partway through. This is approximately the point in the set where the “live” element of *Worlds Live* becomes particularly apparent. During this remix, Robinson again punctuates musical ideas on the drum kit. This quickly transitions to the next track, “Hear the Bells,” which features Robinson singing a harmony line underneath the vocal melody. Yet again, in transition to “The Seconds,” Robinson performs an introductory line on theremin that he immediately loops. This remix of “The Seconds” again removes all stylistic remnants of the original dubstep style, again pulling melodic fragments from the original.

Next, Robinson plays “Lionhearted.” He sings the main vocal line over a sparse harmonic accompaniment, removing highly rhythmic elements from the texture. Instead



Figure 19. *Fuccboi* visual during “Lionhearted” (1:25:15)

of the music video, the graphics follow one of the previously shown protagonists with a bunny ear hood. The rest of the song is mostly unchanged, including the lengthy outro. However, the graphics do change to two teenage characters hanging out alongside a convenience store. Notably, the tone of the visuals seems to change from fantastic worlds to images grounded in reality, an observation reinforced when Robinson flashes the word “fuccboi” across the screen after the animated boy shows a text to the girl (Figure 19). Though only brief, this visual reflects Robinson’s sentiments towards “Lionhearted.”⁴² The track is notably close to the end of the set, but the tone of this visual drastically diverges from the rest of the set. Considered in the context of the track’s mainstream appeal and Robinson’s frustration, it seems likely that this visual is symptomatic of his dismissal of the track.

In the brief gap between “Lionhearted” and “Goodbye to a World,” the audio quickly cycles through ambient noise and distant music as the graphics display various landscapes, many of which were featured in the set. This moment fittingly gives the audience a chance to each world that has been displayed before Robinson launches into “Goodbye to a World.” As the track plays out, the scrolling text visuals from the first portion of the show returns. He closes out the set with “Language,” a track that is notably not on *Worlds*, but is later included in his canon. The final visuals no longer show various landscapes; instead, kaomojis, anime girls, and 8-bit ghosts take turns onscreen as pyrotechnics steal the show.

⁴² I have checked videos of the 2014 tour to see if this visual was a later addition to the set, but most have a gap between the first chorus of “Lionhearted” and “Goodbye to a World”.

Conclusion

Porter Robinson has carefully crafted an artist brand leading up to and following the release of *Worlds*. Unlike Samples' model, based on indie-folk artist Sufjan Stevens who cultivates the persona of a romantic genius, Robinson's brand image focuses on his personal artistic integrity. He began to present an anti-banger narrative, dismissing mainstream EDM as "functional" music and calling for performers to pursue personal artistic expression. The tracks off of *Worlds* exemplified Robinson's new suggested model, often reimagining traditional dance music forms and tropes to create music that was listenable, not just functional. I have illustrated these desirable traits through analysis of two key tracks – "Divinity" and "Fellow Feeling" – which play with listeners' formal expectations and emphasize melodic and harmonic content over rhythmic variation. These tracks stand in contrast to his rhythmically-driven *Spitfire* style, represented here by "100% in the Bitch". These new aesthetic preferences are further reflected in his *Worlds* Live performances, which reimagine the *Worlds* album and present a carefully curated experience that contrasts with the standard dance music festival experience.

Although Robinson's creation of an artist brand is successful, his narrative and execution are not flawless. Robinson himself seems to recognize how some of his music might appear to act in opposition to his own narratives. "Lionhearted" is the most obvious case, as an anthem-like track that readily maps onto verse-chorus form, making it well-suited for radio play. The music video further moves this track into the popular sphere with its focus on Robinson's star power and *Fight Club* references. Robinson has typically refused to address this track in the public sphere, redirecting fans' attention to other tracks off of *Worlds*. It is clear that Robinson remained unsettled over his carefully

crafted public persona; he continually felt the conflict between his anti-commercial impulses and artistic reality. Much like Stevens, the pressure of his expanding fan base following the success of his new album may have put Robinson in an artistic bind, trapping him between fan expectations and his own concerns of artistic integrity.⁴³ Regardless, the persona cultivated during this period earned him an incredibly loyal fan base who viewed him as a refreshingly different artist from the DJs they had previously encountered.

⁴³ Mark Samples, “A Package Deal: Branding, Technology, and Advertising in Music of the 20th and 21st Centuries,” Dissertation (University of Oregon, 2011), 174–175.

CHAPTER III

CONSTRUCTING A VIRTUAL SELF: INTERSTITIAL BRANDING AND SUBCULTURAL AUTHENTICITY

Introduction

A mysterious project called Virtual Self appeared on the dance music scene in 2017. A cryptic website appeared to promote the new act, though it was still unclear who Virtual Self was. On October 25, 2017, a music video for a song titled “Eon Break” was released on YouTube under the alias. A new Virtual Self Twitter account announced the release with a tweet, providing a link to the YouTube video.⁴⁴ Over the next few weeks, mysterious accounts named “technic-Angel” and “Pathselector” also appeared, and made it clear that they were somehow connected to the Virtual Self project. Robinson’s fans began to debate whether or not he was involved with the project – and speculate on what the project even was. Despite the fact that it was the verified Porter Robinson YouTube account that had posted the first music video, the stylistic break and cryptic marketing signaled to some fans that it was markedly different from the well-known Porter Robinson brand. Other fans on the Lionhearted page speculated that Virtual Self was a joint project with another DJ, Rezz.⁴⁵ Yet another group of fans outright rejected the sound of Virtual Self, perceiving the project as just too divergent from *Worlds*. Another

⁴⁴ Virtual Self, “The technic-Angel’s cry is beginning. What is imagined? Virtual Self – Eon Break”, Twitter, October 25, 2017, https://twitter.com/virtual_self/status/923260155151704066

⁴⁵ Branden Nissan, “I have a feeling Virtual Self could be Porter & Rezz. It could be.”, Facebook, November 9, 2017, link unavailable.

single, “Ghost Voices,” was released on November 9th, further fueling the debates and confusion surrounding the project.

Robinson’s Twitter engagement with the Virtual Self project prior to the EP’s November 29th release dispelled any confusion about his involvement.⁴⁶ It became clear that Virtual Self was, in fact, Robinson’s side project. The news was initially met with backlash. A majority of the debates and harsh criticisms that floated around the Lionhearted Facebook group are now deleted, presumably removed by admins because they harmed the group’s viability, but a few pleas to move Virtual Self discussions to a new, specially reserved Facebook group remain.⁴⁷ These posts exemplify the anxieties that plagued the Porter Robinson fandom as the artist moved away from *Worlds*.

However, Robinson’s engagement with the press clearly expressed his frustration with being stuck in a stylistic rut following *Worlds*. In an interview with the online magazine iFLYER, he states that he conceives of the Porter Robinson project as specific to the *Worlds* sound, beginning with “Language” and “Easy.”⁴⁸ His only pursuit under the Porter Robinson moniker after *Worlds* was a collaborative single with DJ-producer Madeon called “Shelter.” This collaboration effectively continued the *Worlds* brand, reinforcing Robinson’s ties to anime through a music video made by A-1 anime studios. The track’s blend of Robinson’s *Worlds* sound and Madeon’s signature style lead to its

⁴⁶ This interaction came primarily in the form of retweets from the three Twitter accounts associated with Virtual Self. Robinson’s announcement of the EP’s release further solidified these speculations.

⁴⁷ The name of this fan group is simply “VIRTUAL SELF”. The group currently has just under 2,000 members and remains significantly less active than the Lionhearted group.

⁴⁸ iFLYER, “Porter Robinson – Virtual Self interview”, YouTube, May 11, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RUKW6Y8CeXg>.

enormous success, culminating in a live tour constructed around “Shelter.” Robinson also told *The Fader*, another online magazine, “[w]hen I released *Worlds*, I thought, ‘I’ve been working for so long to come up with this sound so I should stick with it.’ I thought that was my identity as an artist, but the water went dry and I couldn’t do it.”⁴⁹ The wild success of *Worlds* under the Porter Robinson brand had forced Robinson into a corner; if he were to maintain the fanbase he had accumulated with the Porter Robinson artist brand, his musical options were limited. A return to genres perceived as “mainstream” or musical decisions that contradicted his dismissal of EDM as a function genre could easily be perceived as “selling out”. In order to maintain his fanbase and free himself from the limitations of his artist brand, Robinson created an entirely new project – Virtual Self.

The Virtual Self project’s drastic departure from the musical and brand aesthetics of the Porter Robinson brand serve as a distancing mechanism, affording Robinson the opportunity to foray into styles that the Porter Robinson artist brand had excluded from his brand identity. This project is intended to serve as a taste-making force, resuscitating Y2K dance music aesthetics as filtered through a contemporary lens and irrevocably returning to standard dance music idioms.⁵⁰ The “Utopia System” sets on the tour function not only as cathartic experiences for fans, but also as carefully curated artistic

⁴⁹ Michelle Lhoq, “Porter Robinson’s ambitious, human Virtual Self: His neo-techno love letter to Y2K is a personal breakthrough”, *The Fader*, accessed June 20, 2018, <https://www.thefader.com/2018/02/28/porter-robinson-virtual-self-interview>.

⁵⁰ Kat Bein, “Porter Robinson Confirms Leaked Email on Virtual Self, State of Electronic Music”, *Billboard*, accessed August 18, 2018, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/dance/8097259/porter-robinson-leaked-email-virtual-edm>.

experiences.⁵¹ In this case, Robinson navigates the success of his previous artist brand by creating a brand image for his new act that operates in the space between standard EDM branding practices and the anti-commercialism of the artist brand. I call this approach *interstitial branding*. The liminal space occupied by the interstitial brand strategy allows Robinson to utilize many of the EDM branding tropes that have been adopted and used by many “mainstream” artists without damaging the integrity of the Porter Robinson artist brand. He most prominently manipulates the long-standing DJ tradition of anonymity, which has made its mark on highly commercial EDM, by adopting a new moniker and creating two virtual avatars to stand in as the agents behind the project.⁵² This distancing of the human element with the two avatars, as well as Robinson’s musical decisions in the Utopia System sets, allows him to return to standard EDM subgenres without entirely invalidating his pre-existing artist brand.

This chapter will explore how the Virtual Self brand is formulated in this liminal space through analysis of both brand image formation and musical aesthetics. First, I will explore the aesthetics of the Virtual Self project, differentiating this brand from the Porter Robinson brand. This first portion unpacks the iconography and online presence of the Virtual Self project. The next section explores how Robinson utilizes the two virtual avatars, technic-Angel and Pathselector, to create direct ties between brand and musical

⁵¹ Here I specify “Utopia System” sets to distinguish the performances covered here from the “clubsystem” sets that dotted the first Virtual Self tour. Clubsystem sets do not involve the full production set-up, instead utilizing the club (or arena’s) pre-existing sound system, light, and stage fixtures. Utopia System sets featured the full set-up, including a modified stage.

⁵² See Rebekah Farrugia (2012) and Matthew Collin (2018) for further treatment of anonymity and dance music.

sound. Here I outline Robinson's track attributions and provide a comparative analysis of Pathselector's "Ghost Voices" and technic-Angle's later remix, "ANGEL VOICES." Next, I analyze a recording of one of the Utopia System tour sets, further illustrating the connections between brand and musical decisions. I argue that Robinson's careful selection of particular tracks earns the project subcultural capital, navigating the restrictions of his earlier narrative by situating the Virtual Self project within the underground dance music scene of the early 2000s. Finally, I outline the basic tenets of the interstitial branding strategy utilizing the case study at hand.

Creating a Virtual Self: An Overview of Aesthetics

The iconography associated with Virtual Self is a drastic departure from Robinson's *Worlds*-era aesthetics. He clearly evokes the technophilia of the Y2K era while also appealing to the DIY ethos valued by his fans. The album cover of the *Virtual Self* EP summarizes the visual aesthetics of Virtual Self fairly well (Figure 20). The title (and artist name) is in a Matrix-esque text to the left side, with a crystal floating amidst a digitized magic circle occupying a majority of the cover. The color scheme is distinctly colder than the ethereal hues associated with *Worlds*, evoking the cold, digital sphere. Text fragments of varying opacity float in the background. These segments of text resemble lines found in speculative poetry, often posing quasi-philosophical questions centering around concepts of virtuality or utopianism. Each of these lines is intended to seem as though they were generated by artificial intelligence, with an extensively involved creation process.⁵³ A chat forum located at the URL Virtualself.life models this

⁵³ Robinson describes his process for creating these phrases in the aforementioned interview with Monique Lhooq at The Fader: "I used a few techniques to generate a lot of them, like writing sentences and translating them into Russian into Czech into Korean

illusion, featuring several accounts that post the Markovian lines in dialogue with each other (Figure 21). Although there is a “create account” button in the bottom left hand corner, the link is a dead end; this message board is not intended for practical use, instead serving merely as another branding device for Virtual Self. This aesthetic world is inhabited by two virtual avatars, the primary “agents” of the Virtual Self brand.

The two avatars constitute a large portion of the brand’s image, standing in for Robinson as the primary agents in the musicking process.⁵⁴ Technic-Angel is depicted



Figure 20. *Virtual Self EP cover*

and back into English using Google Translate... I used another similar technique called Markov chain, an algorithmic process that takes a large body of text and tries to generate new sentences from patterns it sees... I took all the texts I’d written and ran them through Markov chains and generators, and picked the ones that felt the most ethereal and cyber. So it was partially done by AI and curated by me...”

⁵⁴ Musicologist Joanna Demers and ethnomusicologist Kiri Miller treat virtual avatars in the rhythm games *Dance Dance Revolution* and *Just Dance/Dance Central*. Both authors argue that these avatars adopt a special instructive/collaborative relationship with players. In this relationship, avatars both demonstrate moves for players and also enact group performance through their presence. Robinson’s employment of the two avatars are stand-ins for his own musical performance reflects this player-avatar relationship by mediating his listeners’ relationship with the music through technic-Angel and Pathselector.

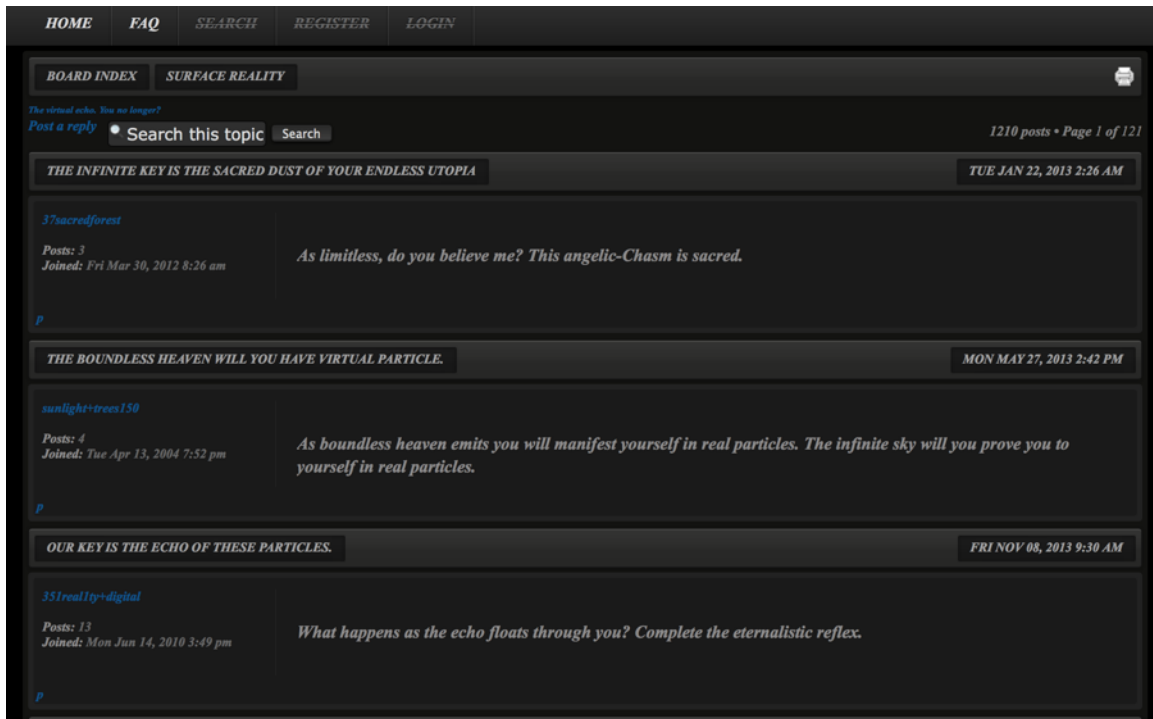


Figure 21. Message board at virtualself.life featuring the Markovian texts

wearing a long, black cloak; Pathselector dons long, white hoodie, with a gold, geometric half-mask (Figures 22 and 23). These two avatars sit (in Japanese *seiza* style) on an isolated island comprising two cones arranged to form a right corner. They are nearly always portrayed in a space that is largely black and empty, much like a virtual space waiting to be filled by the user. Neither technic-Angel or Pathselector ever emote, their faces perpetually staring blankly ahead. Aside from their faces and attire, neither have any particularly notable characteristics. They read much like blank slates waiting for intervention from a distanced user, recalling avatars from early-2000s video games such as *Dance Dance Revolution*.⁵⁵ Robinson assigns musical personalities to each persona by attributing particular tracks to each avatar. Out of the five tracks released on the EP, “Eon

⁵⁵ In the same interview with The Fader, Robinson also cites avatars from forum signatures and the online art community deviantart as inspiration for Pathselector and technic-Angel.

Break”, “Particle Arts”, and “Key” are attributed to technic-Angel. The remaining two tracks from the Virtual Self EP, “Ghost Voices” and “a.i.ngel (Become God)” are attributed to Pathselector. These avatars not only serve a musical function, but also allow Robinson to play with the longstanding EDM tradition of anonymity. The adoption of an alias, such as Virtual Self, deadmau5, or Marshmello, is one that has existed since the genre’s inception, but has more recently become associated with blatant branding techniques. The choice of virtual avatars, however, separates the human element that might otherwise be perceived as “inauthentic.” The function of these avatars is multivalent, with far-reaching consequences for the brand image.



Figure 22. technic-Angel



Figure 23. *Pathselector*

The Virtual Self brand also successfully aligns itself with many of the aesthetics of the popular rhythm game *Dance Dance Revolution* (DDR).⁵⁶ These connections span both the project's musical style and the distinct Y2K-era iconography. As previously mentioned, the two avatar personas are the most potent iconographic connection. Alongside these avatars, the musical style of the *Virtual Self* EP emulates the original DDR soundtracks. The tracks generally fall within the trance, hardcore, house, and drum n' bass genres. These genres also maintain connections with the early rave scene, some falling entirely outside of the purview of mainstream EDM. While trance and house have been co-opted and modified for the palette of festival-goers, the particular style that Robinson chooses aligns more closely with Y2K-era underground trance. This stylistic

⁵⁶ I should note that I am treating *Dance Dance Revolution* both as a playable game and as a game franchise, recognizing the use of DDR soundtracks as branding materials.

choice both makes reference to the intentionally underground ethos of the DDR brand and positions the Virtual Self project as musically opposed to the mainstream, appealing to discourses of subcultural authenticity. Fans are keenly aware of the striking visual and musical similarities between the two brands. Robinson's narrative in interviews strongly ties the project to his early love for DDR, but the connection was taken one step further by the use of "Ghost Voices" in the rhythm game Beatmania.⁵⁷ Fans have also solidified these connections, occasionally instigating a chant of "DDR! DDR!" prior to Virtual Self shows.⁵⁸

Yet another appeal to subcultural authenticity lies in the brand's DIY aesthetic. Robinson consciously gave both the visual and musical elements of the project an unfinished quality. In the case of the music, he achieved this DIY feeling by under-mastering his tracks, consciously leaving in un-mastered elements that would typically be considered production flaws by contemporary standards. The balance of elements throughout the texture of the tracks is one of the areas where this aesthetic presents itself more obviously; in some of the more texturally-dense areas individual lines are difficult to make out and volume levels occasionally begin to clip (Figure 24). The musical result both recalls the technological limitations of the Y2K era and leaves the impression that the tracks were made in a home studio. The iconography also utilizes a grainy resolution towards similar ends (Figure 25).

These aesthetic choices firmly place Virtual Self in the world of the early 2000s, providing teleological distance from the modern music industry. This DIY aesthetic is

⁵⁷ Again, see Robinson's interview with Monique Lhoq of The Fader.

⁵⁸ See the beginning of the concert recording analyzed below for an example of this.

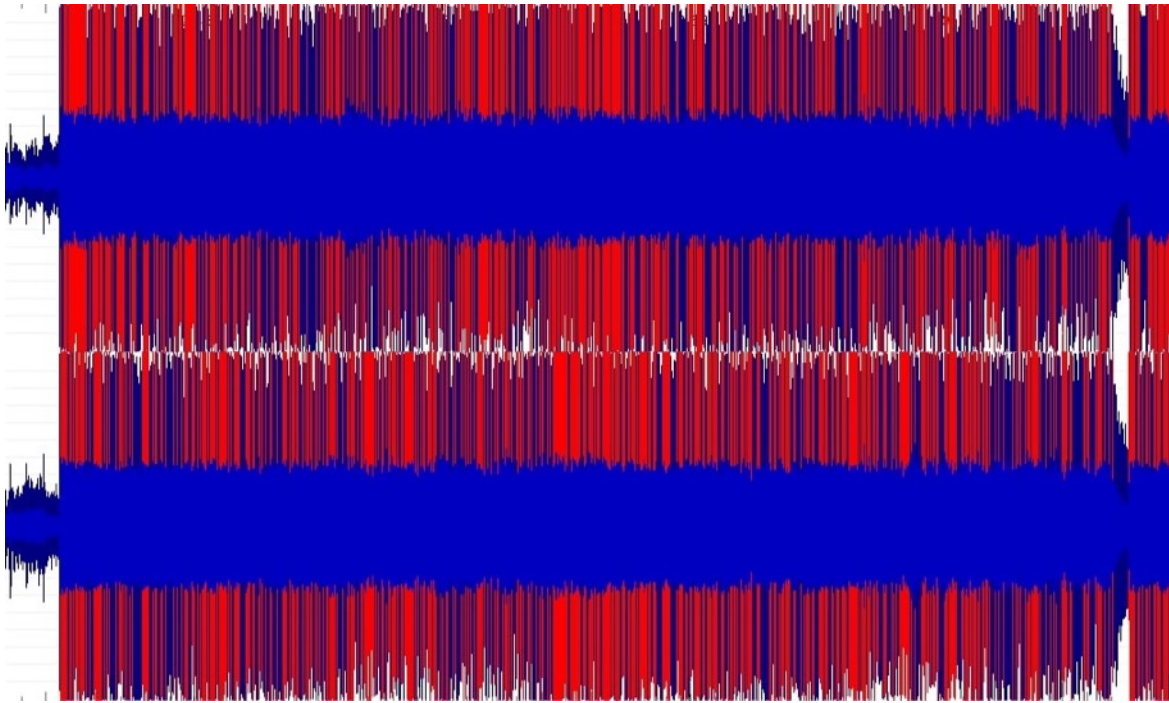


Figure 24. A portion of the waveform for "Eon Break" with red lines illustrating Robinson's decision to allow the track to clip.



Figure 25. More Virtual Self iconography, featuring the Markovian texts and low image resolution.

further emphasized by the independent publishing of Virtual Self's music. Unlike Robinson's primary project, in which he was assisted by the Monstercat label, he appears to exert nearly complete control over the branding and marketing of Virtual Self, though he does employ a public relations specialist. Robinson's branding decisions cultivate a brand that aesthetically hovers between blatant commercial appeals and anti-commercial sentiment, but these decisions are not without sonic consequences.

Sonically Branding Pathselector and technic-Angel

The Virtual Self project is a cohesive force, with the music itself conceived as a portion of the brand image. As previously mentioned, the two digital avatars, Pathselector and technic-Angel, are specifically assigned generic categories through tracks attributed to each persona. Although the project is stylistically cohesive, the two personas function as opposing sides of the same coin. With the tracks attributed to Pathselector, Robinson evokes a particular moment in the development of "four-on-the-floor" genres like house, trance, and jungle. Technic-Angel's tracks primarily fall within breakbeat-driven genres such as drum n' bass and hardcore.⁵⁹ As previously mentioned, these genres all experienced a boom around the turn of the century, situating Virtual Self's musical aesthetics firmly within Y2K nostalgia. These attributions also make the avatars come to life, musically defining their personalities. Here I provide a comparative analysis of two tracks – "Ghost Voices" by Pathselector and "ANGEL VOICES," a cover by technic-Angel released after the album – to establish the fundamental stylistic differences between the two personas. These differences establish a fundamental narrative for the

⁵⁹ For more on the distinction between breakbeat-driven and four-on-the-floor genres, see Butler (2006), 78–80.

Virtual Self brand, highlighting a duplicity that Robinson utilizes to full effect in live performance.

Pathselector's "Ghost Voices," the second track on the *Virtual Self* EP, is a trance track at 120 bpm. It generally follows the build-core structure outlined by Mark Butler, gradually extending each section as the track progresses (Figure 26). A short introduction begins the track, with just an ethereal melody, mid-range countermelody, and a pulsating bass line. This melody utilizes a four-bar hypermeasure, repeated twice until an accelerating snare drum sample signals the shift to a textural and timbral shift. Quickly changing into the first build, the melody transforms into a mid-range, reverberant choral sample, with a drum beat comprising tom notes on beats 1 and 3 as well as snare hits on beats 2 and 4, accentuated by hi-hat notes on the off-beats, in the background (Figure 27). This drum pattern is colloquially known as the "boots-n-cats" pattern, commonly found in house music. Although the introduction encourages listeners to hear the four-bar hypermeasure and establish that as their primary time-feel, this section forces the structure of small-beats on to the listener, erasing the initial ambiguity.

The next section is a standard build section. The texture has again cleared, leaving only a vocal synthesizer repeating the lines "can't you say," "sometimes you say," and "sometimes, some days." The drum beat is gone, leaving only hand claps on beats 2 and 4; this again manipulates the listener's time feel, making this section feel drastically slower and more relaxed than the break section. Underneath, a new synthesizer line that recalls, but does not repeat, the first synthesizer melody serves as a thematically

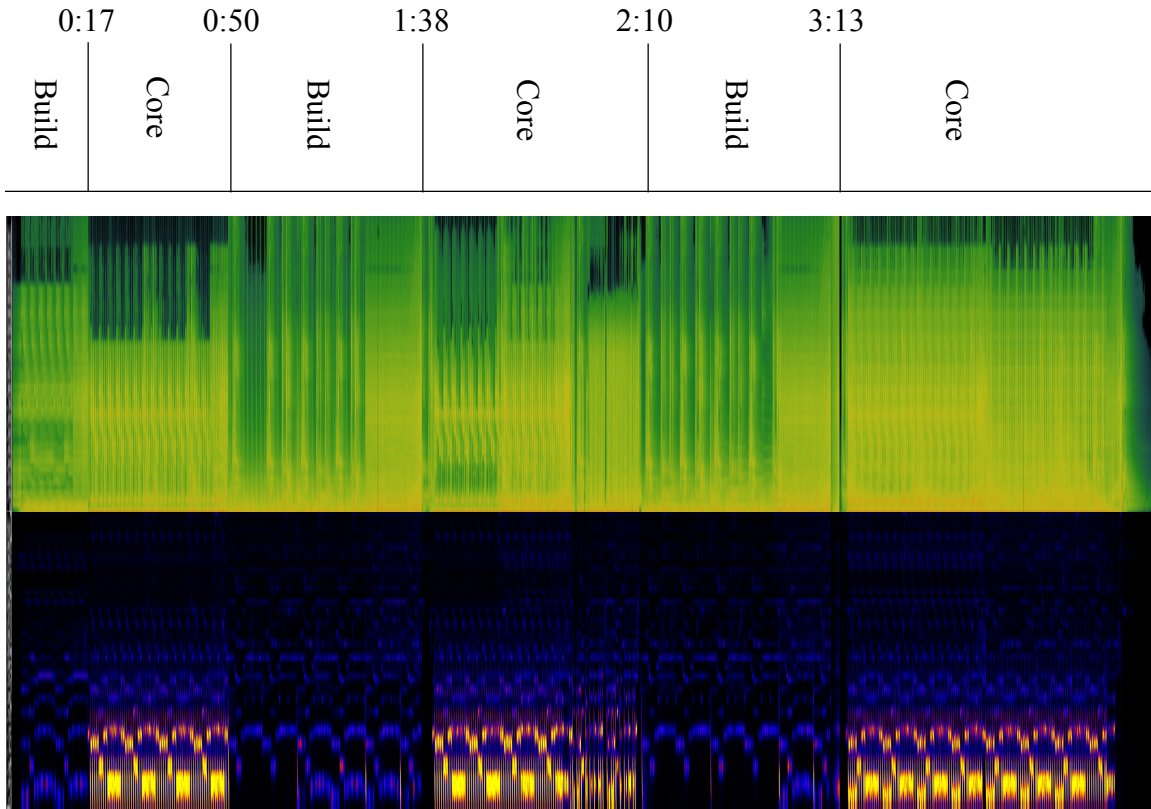


Figure 27. Formal outline of "Ghost Voices"

Beat	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
Hi-hat		x		x		x		x
Snare (Clap)			x				x	
Tom	x				x			

Figure 26. The "boots-n-cats" figure found in "Ghost Voices"

connecting element. This line first occurs in a mid-range iteration, but is doubled an octave higher two hypermeasures away from the next build, at the same time as a 16th-note snare line is added back in. This snare line again accelerates to bring us to the core of the song, but this time the final measure gives way for a reverberating iteration of the vocal sample to announce our arrival at a climactic point. Once we arrive at this iteration of the core, the earlier "boots-n-cats" pattern is significantly simplified, this time with

only on-beat snare and tom hits, and minimal interjections from the hi-hat (Figure 28). After two hypermeasures the “boots-n-cats” rhythm returns again, fully filling out the core texture. Once more, after two hypermeasures, the texture of the core changes drastically. Here, only the bass notes swell underneath the vocal sample for approximately two measures, then the synthesizer line from the end of the build returns. The waveform makes it clear that the sounds in this section are grouped together, occurring in small swells. Although a large portion of the material is taken from the break and buildup, and the texture is significantly sparser throughout this section, the intensity of the core is maintained, causing this portion of the track to act as an extension of the core.

This quasi-core section also eases the transition back into the next build, which layers on orchestral synthesizers on third hypermetric repetitions. The third and final buildup takes a much different form this time. The orchestral synths continue through this section, which again places the doubled synthesizer melody at the forefront of the texture. However, this time the 16th-note snare line is ever-present but difficult to notice until the end of the build. Robinson has applied a low-pass filter to the snare drum, which initially distorts and minimizes the sound by only allowing the lowest frequencies to pass through then slowly adding the higher frequencies back into the sample, allowing both the volume

Beat	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&	2	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
Hi-hat												(a)	x			x-
Snare (Clap)			x				x				x				x	
Tom	x				x				x				x			

Figure 28. Two bar figure showing the variation of the “boots-n-cats” pattern. The rhythm marked with “(a)” indicates that a hi-hat hit on the final 16th-note of the beat, and the note marked with “-” indicates a sustain.

and presence within the texture to increase throughout the build. Once again, there is a clear aural signal that we have arrived at the core. This time, the synthesizer line is frozen in its tracks, with a single note crescendoing into the new section. The final core is a complete texture comprising interjections from all of the textural elements introduced throughout the track. A final, echoing “can’t you say” concludes the track.

Because of its melodic focus, “Ghost Voices” fits neatly within the trance genre. The changes throughout the track are relatively minimal, emphasizing gradual change instead of drastic timbral and rhythmic difference. Much of the interest lies in the addition or removal of layers. On the other hand, technic-Angel’s “ANGEL VOICES” immediately foregrounds the rhythmic lines and establishes stark timbral contrast between sections. Unlike “Ghost Voices,” the listener’s attention is directed to these changes instead of the melodic line, which serves as another element in the texture. Robinson employs a variety of techniques to achieve this kind of directed listening and to establish the differences between Pathselector and technic-Angel’s interpretations.

The form of “ANGEL VOICES” also departs from the original; a brief introduction and hard-hitting outro are added, significantly expanding the form (Figure 29). In the introduction, chords from a synthesized keyboard gently wash over the top of the texture, outlining the chord structure for the opening section. This first section manipulates the original synthesizer line from “Ghost Voices,” altering the note order and speeding it up to match the 138-bpm tempo. The “can’t you say” vocal line is introduced, but only repeats a few times before the build begins with a newly-composed synthesizer line in the style of the original track serving as the main melody. The build is drastically extended, layering various percussive elements over many hypermeasures. The hi-hat,

snare, and tom are introduced one at a time, gradually building to the core; this varies drastically from the sudden snare sweep utilized in “Ghost Voices.”

The core of this remix is notably different. Instead of driving, four-on-the-floor house beat, the bass drum operates in half-time, placing a slow hardstyle drum pattern underneath the synthesized vocal line (Figure 30). Every two hypermeasures a new textural element is added in, culminating in the initial core texture with an additional 16th-note synthesizer melody and a harsh, lower-pitched synthesizer rhythmically emphasizing beats 2 and 4. A brief “can’t you say” announces our arrival at the next section within the form, where the texture is remarkably sparse. After a few hypermeasures of this sparse texture, the build begins once more. This time, the core returns pitched up two octaves, with nearly its full texture, though one of the melodic synthesizer lines is replaced by yet another driving 16th-note pattern. Relatively little textural layering occurs in this iteration of the core. Instead, we quickly return to a sparser texture and begin yet another build.

0:13	1:11	1:57	3:18	3:54	4:28	6:00	
Intro	Build	Core	Build	Core	Build	Core	Outro

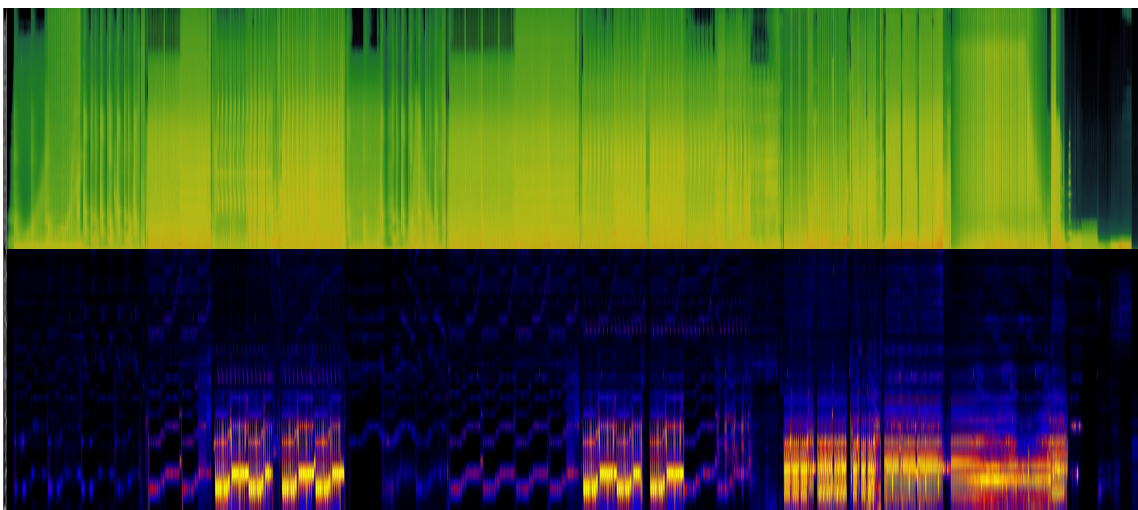


Figure 29. Formal outline of "ANGEL VOICES"

Another “can’t you say” marks the beginning of a drum break, varying this final build.

Technic-Angel announces our arrival at the final core by saying “Virtual Self” in the final beats of the build. This final statement of the core is the most striking departure from “Ghost Voices.” It obscures any remnants of the original melodic line, instead presenting only a drum line. This drum line is again a hardstyle rhythm, though this time the time-feel remains at the 138-bpm level instead of switching to a half-time feel. After five hypermeasures of elaboration the underlying pulse switches back to a four-on-the-floor house feel, with bits of the remixed synthesizer lines returning to offer some tonal content (Figure 31). The outro begins with this heavy, relentless four-on-the-floor house beat, which fades in and out under a new synthesizer line. The final moments of the track are just a foreboding, reverberating noise that swells and fades. Compared to the original, “ANGEL VOICES” is much more rhythmically-driven, straying away from the long melodic phrases that initially characterized “Ghost Voices.”

Although remixes of Robinson’s music are fairly common, particularly with the *Worlds Remixed* album, “ANGEL VOICES” is an exceptional case. Not only has Robinson remixed himself, but the track provides further insight into the intended stylistic differences between the technic-Angel and Pathselector avatars. While Pathselector focuses exclusively on melodic and harmonic elements, technic-Angel

Beat	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&	2	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
Hi-hat	x								x						x	x
Snare					x								x			
Bass	x				x				x				x		x	x

Figure 30. Two bar hypermeasure utilizing the hardstyle rhythm in a half-time feel

Beat	1	&	2	&	3	&	4	&	2	&	2	&	3	&	4	&
Hi-hat					x								x			
Bass	x		x		x		x		x		x		x		x	x

Figure 31. Simplified hardstyle rhythm in final core, maintaining 138 bpm time-feel

obscures melody and harmony in favor of manipulating texture and rhythm (directly clashing with Robinson’s values as expressed in his 2014 AMA).⁶⁰ These two avatars open up a wealth of generic and stylistic possibilities for the Virtual Self project, allowing Robinson to run the gamut of dance music without appearing scattered or contradictory. It must be noted, however, that these established stylistic differences are not merely relevant to Virtual Self’s published music; the presence of these two avatars and their musical personalities directly impact Robinson’s performance decisions, tangibly manifesting in his live shows.

Performing the Virtual Self: The Influence of Brand on Set Construction

In September of 2018, I attended the Seattle date of the Utopia System tour at WaMu Theater. The attendees looked like a fairly typical rave crowd, most around 18–25, scantily clad in brightly colored outfits and arms adorned with kandi.⁶¹ Unlike my experiences at all-ages Porter Robinson shows, I did not notice any parents or families piling into the venue. There were, however, a handful of attendees that were clearly seasoned ravers whose earliest encounters with EDM may have been right around the

⁶⁰ Porter Robinson, “i’m porter robinson, the electronic musician. AMA!,” Reddit, accessed June 10, 2018, https://www.reddit.com/r/IAmA/comments/27t6op/im_porter_robinson_the_electronic_musician_ama/.

⁶¹ Kandi are bracelets made out of pony beads, traded among ravers to commemorate new meetings or “good vibes” at shows.

turn of the century, or even during the rave heyday of the '90s. After passing through security and entering the venue, the opening acts began to play, a carefully curated lineup that perfectly set the tone for Virtual Self. Between G Jones' set and Virtual Self, the stage crew worked frantically to construct a plexiglass stage that would allow lights to shine upwards throughout the performance. Unlike the *Worlds Live* performances, the only screen for graphics was directly behind Robinson. Notably, Robinson entered the stage uncostumed, choosing to perform as himself; this was in contrast to Virtual Self's premiere performance in Brooklyn, NY, in which he and a guest dressed up as Pathselector and technic-Angel. The crowd's excitement grew as we knew something spectacular was about to begin.

The remainder of this chapter interrogates one of Virtual Self's Utopia System sets, calling into question the relationship between branding and live musical performance. My analysis draws on both my own experience and a Youtube video of the Utopia System tour stop at the Regency Ballroom in San Francisco, CA on September 29, 2018.⁶² Despite slight differences between performances at different stops, this recording can be treated as quasi-authoritative due to the consistency between different stops; the recording I have chosen largely resembles the set I watched.⁶³ The nature of this analysis will differ significantly from the preceding analysis of *Worlds Live* sets. Since the

⁶² Aftermath DJ, "VIRTUAL SELF LIVE @ The Regency Ballroom", YouTube, September 30, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=573INf-ShtQ>

⁶³ I should note that this analysis does not account for the clubsystem sets that dotted the Utopia System tour. Unlike the consistent Utopia System sets that operate on a more curatorial level, the clubsystem sets are truly improvised sets that vary in their track selection and contour. These sets also lack the full staging that is integral to my visual analyses.

amount of music released under the Virtual Self persona is significantly less and the project's brand seeks to situate the project within a particular historical moment and lineage, track selection plays a much larger role in considerations of set construction. In order to compile a set of the appropriate length, Robinson must select tracks by other artists. The tracks he chooses are quite telling, as he deliberately avoids tracks released under his Porter Robinson moniker as well as those by major contemporary artists. Robinson has curated a set that firmly situates Virtual Self within the Y2K aesthetics of DDR, highlighting older artists in the techno, trance, hardcore, and electro subgenres. His musical and performative decisions are directly influenced by his branding decisions at all levels, from the form of the set, which is split between Pathselector and technic-Angel, to the visual elements.

In order to accurately analyze the set construction, my musical analysis will situate track selection as an integral element of musical shape.⁶⁴ I will focus on the genre, tempo, and mood (or “vibe”) of the tracks inserted between Virtual Self's tracks in order to more fully understand how these tracks both operate within Virtual Self's artistic aims and brand narrative. Concurrent analysis of the visual, staged elements of the show will provide a full picture of the performance experience, tying musical events to their visual counterparts in the context of the full Virtual Self brand image. I seek to contrast Robinson's decisions here with those made in his *Worlds* set, understanding how interstitial branding functions in a performance context.

⁶⁴ Alinka E. Greasley and Helen M. Prior, “Mixtapes and turntablism: DJs' perspectives on musical shape,” *Empirical Musicology Review* 8 no. 1 (2013): 23–43.

Robinson opens his Utopia System sets with a narrator saying keywords from the Markovian phrases from the *virtualself.life* forum. The screen remains blank until the logo flashes across the screen, and only white lights rising up from underneath the plexiglass stage as the same narrator announces that Virtual Self has taken the stage (Figure 32). Robinson opens the set with a remix of “Halcyon” by Deapmash, a track in the trance genre that provides an ethereal atmosphere. Small fragments of “Particle Arts,” one of the tracks attributed to technic-Angel appear over the top, but the transition to “Ghost Voices” clarifies that Pathselector is opening up the performance. Robinson allows the track to play out mostly unchanged, expanding the form only slightly. Although it does not directly open the set, Robinson utilizes “Ghost Voices” as a framing element, for the remainder of Pathselector’s set, emphasizing ties to the trance genre. The next portion of the set quickly proceeds through two Virtual Self edits of techno tracks released in 2017. The proportion of trance to techno in this opening portion of the set establishes Pathselector’s aesthetic priorities; trance is at the forefront of the generic palette, with techno in a supporting role.

Next Robinson plays PlanitB’s trance remix of the iconic Kingdom Hearts theme song “Simple and Clean” by Utada Hikaru. As this remix plays out, a clip from the original video game appears onscreen, diverging from the graphics utilized throughout the rest of the set. At both the Seattle show and in the video of the Regency Ballroom sets, fans were particularly enthusiastic about this moment, singing along when the lyrics began. Although Kingdom Hearts is in a strikingly different game genre than DDR, Robinson’s musical choice here evokes and reinforces the Virtual Self brand’s connection to video games. As he transitions into “Pistolwhip” by Joshua Ryan, the



Figure 32. First appearance of the Virtual Self logo onscreen (1:44)

narrator finally announces that Pathselector is the persona playing the current set, welcoming the audience to part 1 of the Utopia System (Figure 33). Until this point, Robinson intentionally allowed his fans to infer that Pathselector was playing, but it is notable that he chooses to confirm and reinforce this inference, ensuring that the reference to the Virtual Self brand cannot be missed.

The remainder of Pathselector's set continues to reference his particular style and aesthetic. Once the next track, "Atmosphere" by Kayestone, begins playing, Robinson utilizes on-screen graphics to tie the track directly to the Virtual Self project's brand aesthetic. He accomplishes this by placing the track's tagline "can you feel the atmosphere?" onscreen in the same font as the scrolling text from the `virtualself.life` phrases (Figure 34). This connection indicates that the track was likely not only chosen for its stylistic similarity to Pathselector's trance tracks, but also the similarity of the track's tagline to the phrases generated for the branding materials surrounding the project. This text is later replaced by visuals reading "Initial dream..." repeatedly

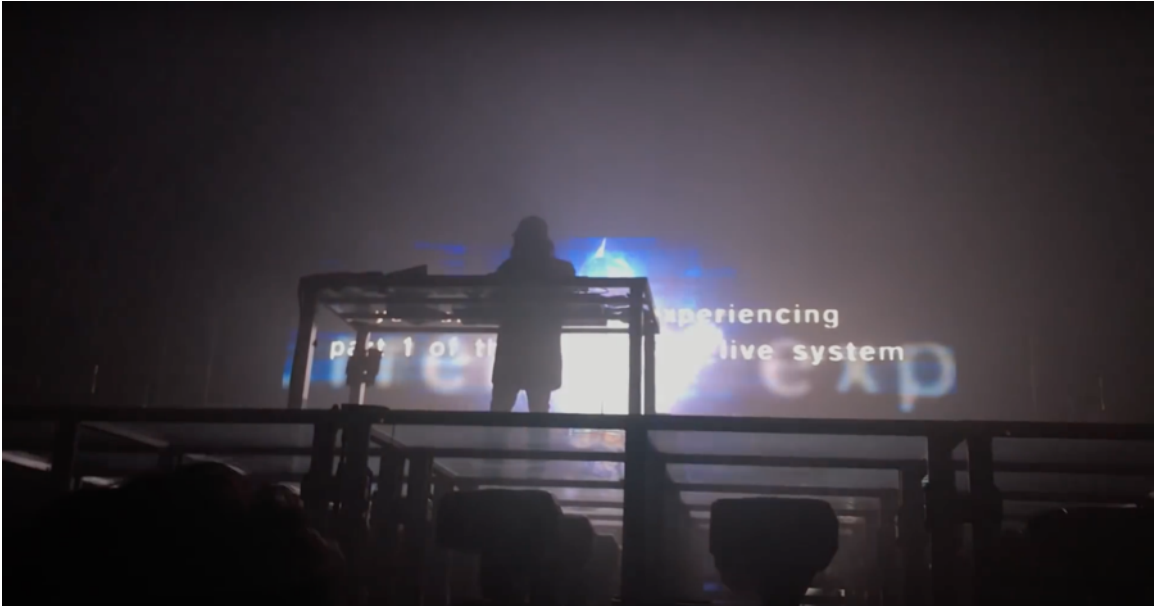


Figure 33. Announcement of Pathselector's set (20:22)

flashing across the screen. Robinson transitions from “Atmosphere” into “Look to the Sky (True Color Extended Mix)” by SySF feat. ANNA, a track from the 2001 album *DDRMAX: Dance Dance Revolution 6th Mix*. Although he has previously emphasized the brand connections primarily through visual elements and stylistic allusions, in live performance Robinson intentionally inserts a DDR track here to explicitly connect Virtual Self tracks to one of their major influences.

At this point, Robinson moves further back in time, mixing in “Tripping Out” by DJ Misjah & Groovehead. This Dutch duo were underground European techno pioneers who released music prolifically in 1995 and ceased to produce soon thereafter. As this track plays out texts again flash across the screen, though this time they are less referential to the Markovian texts, including words such as “acid” and the text “2 x 2” (Figure 35). The next track, “Deadline” by Dutch Force, reifies these new ties to early Dutch techno and trance. Dutch Force is one of many aliases of producer Martinus Bernardus de Goeji whose influence has stretched from his work as DJ-producer Rank 1

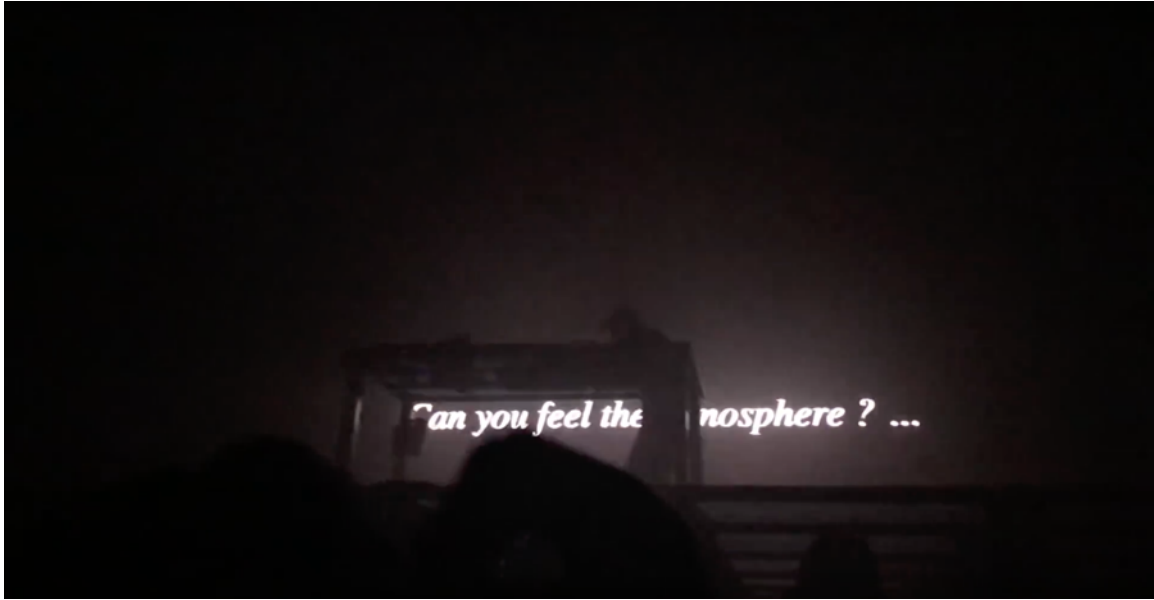


Figure 34. "Can you feel the atmosphere?" graphic (26:17)

to his recent collaborations with and co-production for mainstream trance giant Armin van Buuren. This section serves to authenticate Robinson's use of these earlier styles; although these artists made a major impact on dance music in the 1990s, relatively few contemporary artists utilize their tracks in sets. Their inclusion here displays Robinson's insider knowledge, situating the Virtual Self project within earlier discourses of authenticity.

Following this section, Robinson again mixes in a track from *DDRMAX: Dance Dance Revolution 6th Mix*, "Ghosts" by Tenth Planet. Here he again consciously utilizes tracks from rhythm game soundtracks to emphasize Virtual Self's place in the DDR soundworld of the early 2000s. He then, however, moves the Virtual Self set much further into the future, playing a 2017 track by the producer Scalameriya. Here he's careful to maintain the underground vibe to the set, selecting a relatively unknown track that again differentiates Virtual Self from the mainstream. The next portion of the set



Figure 35. "2x2" text onscreen (32:17)

quickly oscillates between trance and techno, eventually superimposing Enrico's techno track "Symbiosis" over Ayla's much earlier self-titled trance track. Again, Pathselector's two aesthetic sensibilities are put to the fore, this time mixed in a new way.

Finally, approximately 50 minutes after he played "Ghost Voices", Robinson mixes in the second and final Virtual Self track in Pathselector's set. This time he plays "a.i.ngel (Become God)", again matching the attribution to the personality performing. As the track plays out, text such as "self" appears onscreen again and a figure sheathed in light, presumably Pathselector, hovers behind Robinson (Figure 36). Notably, Robinson does not close Pathselector's set with "a.i.ngel (Become God)", instead utilizing more tracks by other artists to extend this first set's narrative. He next plays a ScummV's remix of "Duvet" by Bôa, an indie-alternative band. ScummV is a relatively unknown producer, again authenticating Robinson's performance by emphasizing his knowledge of the

underground scene.⁶⁵ This juxtaposition with Pathselector’s “a.i.ngel (Become God)” also places Virtual Self’s tracks directly in dialogue with the contemporary underground, musically emphasizing the distance from the mainstream.

Pathselector’s set concludes with a mashup of Laurent Garnier’s “Greed” and the melodies of the early trance hit “Castles in the Sky” by Ian Van Dahl. The visuals pan over a digitally animated face, though this face does not belong to Pathselector nor technic-Angel. The narrator’s voice appears briefly in the background when the synthesizer line from “Castles in the Sky” gains dominance in the texture. We are not able to make out any words; this appearance seems to be just a textural and timbral addition to the track. Pathselector’s set concludes by fading out the final chord of the chorus of “Castle in the Sky,” all of the lighting rapidly fading to black.



Figure 36. Pathselector appears onscreen behind Robinson (56:09)

⁶⁵ ScummV’s YouTube channel only contains a handful of original tracks and some scattered remixes. He has 251 subscribers, but the videos unassociated with Virtual Self have only been viewed 321 to 3.4k times. This is in stark contrast to his remix of Bôa’s “Duvet” utilized in this set, which has nearly 28k views.

This first half of the set simultaneously utilizes the “up, up, and away” and “riding the waves” set shapes outlined by Broughton and Brewster, a combination also identified in Greasley and Prior’s work on musical shape in DJ sets (Figure 37).⁶⁶ Robinson carefully balances a gradual increase in overall energy with small valleys that give the audience brief breaks. The rate at which the energy grows increases drastically towards the end of Pathselector’s set, and valleys are fewer and farther apart. This final portion of the set is clearly intended to set the stage for the appearance of the technic-Angel persona, almost serving as an extended warmup for the higher energy hardstyle and drum and bass styles associated with the latter avatar.

The transition between Pathselector and technic-Angel’s sets is the moment in which the Virtual Self brand is most clearly emphasized. At 1:06:06, the Virtual Self logo flashes back onto the screen, with the Markovian texts utilized on the virtualself.life “forum” appearing on the screen, much like code appearing against a computer window’s background. Quickly, the narrator announces that Phase 1 of the Utopia System has ended, and that Phase 2 is beginning in a manner similar to a video game narrator informing the player that their game is about to begin. Once again, this is particularly evocative of early *Dance Dance Revolution* games. In these games, once a player has selected a track to dance to the narrator affirms their musical choice by informing them they have good taste in music, then asks if the player is ready immediately prior to the step sequence’s initiation. In the Utopia System sets Robinson’s musical decisions heighten this connection to DDR. He utilizes the initial buildup much like the short introduction sections for newly selected tracks in DDR games, a warm-up period during

⁶⁶ See Broughton & Brewster (2002) and Greasley & Prior (2013).

Up, up and away

This is the norm today, largely because every DJ wants their little two-hour set to peak the night. Crowds respond to it, but only because they're rarely offered anything different. Start off fairly quickly and continue in an upward curve until the dancefloor is banging away so fast that everyone's running on the spot. Not for the faint of heart.

The rollercoaster

Good pop DJs programme sets that are almost Pavlovian in their effectiveness, and you'll see this style in most carpet-and-chrome nightspots (it lets the DJ run through all the genres and it's good for alcohol sales). Take the tempo gradually up until you reach a frenetic peak, and then drop down dramatically to reggae pace. Repeat. Then repeat again.

The work-out

This is how most long-set DJs play – they treat the evening as an aerobics lesson. Start out slow with warm-up exercises to let the dancers acclimatise. Gradually shift it up a few gears until you reach a peak, and then hold it there (allowing a few breathers along the way). Finally, gently drop the tempo at the end of the evening to allow for cool-out stretching exercises.

Riding the waves

David Mancuso started the world DJing with his Loft parties in Manhattan. Pleasingly, he is still doing them over 30 years later. David eases people into his evenings with slower tunes – ambient, jazz, world music – before gradually upping the tempo and making the music more dancefloor friendly. As the evening progresses, he's not afraid to occasionally slow things down, creating a gently undulating night.

Shaping your set

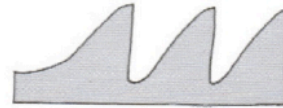


Figure 37. Suggested set shapes (Broughton & Brewster, 2002, pg. 133)

which the player is expected to prepare for the heavy workload of following their assigned steps throughout the track. In this case, the introduction of the technic-Angel persona and the extended build provide a much-needed respite for the dancers on the dance floor. This moment also builds suspense and anticipation for the more intense set to follow. Once the build is complete, Robinson drops a heavy hardstyle beat indicating that the set proper has begun. In this moment, the audience is most keenly aware of the dual personas of the Virtual Self brand. With Pathselector's set fresh on their minds, technic-Angel begins to dominate the music-making process.

Technic-Angel's set adopts the riding the waves set shape, with almost no increase in energy throughout the night. Robinson utilizes the slow intros and outros for various songs to create peaks and valleys, generally hovering around the same energy level. The contour of the set is fairly accurately represented as a sine wave, with the middle point at the energy level that Pathselector's set had reached. Notably, technic-Angel's portion of the set is significantly shorter than Pathselector. Robinson employs the golden ratio, with the most intense portion of his performance (technic-Angel's appearance) occupying approximately the final third of the set proper. Taken as a whole set, the Pathselector set operates as an extended warmup and the technic-Angel set as the core of the "work out" set shape. Robinson's encore briefly elevates the energy again before mellowing out again as a cool down phase. This overall shape plays with the conventions of long-play sets, like the Utopia System sets. If we continue the DDR metaphors, this extended warm-up feels as if our player is taking their time warming up with trance and house tracks before they approach the intense hardstyle and drum and bass tracks towards the end of a playing session.

Robinson utilizes the first two tracks of this set to frame technic-Angel's sonic and visual world. During "Black Widow" by [KRTM], the first track of this set, bright red and orange graphics that resemble error messages splash across the screen, moving away from the cool blue hues associated with Pathselector's set (Figure 38). These graphics mirror the shift in musical style. The tempo of technic-Angel's set is immediately much faster and relentless bass drums dominate the texture; although "Black Widow" is a techno track, much like many of the tracks in Pathselector's set, Robinson intentionally utilizes a track with a much quicker tempo and mixes the bass drum so that

it is more present than in the original track. He then mixes in “Quasar” by Outphase, a track from a 2003 Beatmania soundtrack, again highlighting Virtual Self’s connection to rhythm games.⁶⁷ Here he emphasizes the omnipresent melodic line, but employs devices absent from the original song to fit within technic-Angel’s sound. He also adds in a drum line that resembles the drum line of “Particle Arts.” Towards the end of this track, he employs a half-time feel in the drum pattern, similar to the half-time technique employed in “ANGEL VOICES.” At one of the cores, the worlds “SACRED REALITY” appear onscreen, again tying the live set back to the Markovian texts from Virtualself.life (Figure 39).

Robinson continues the connection to rhythm games by continuing the set with “Smoke” by Aya, another track included in the Beatmania games, which he mashes up with “Take Me Away” by Concord Dawn. He primarily utilizes the drum line from



Figure 38. Graphics during "Black Widow" by [KRTM] (1:08:37)

⁶⁷ Beatmania is a rhythm game similar to Dance Dance Revolution, which allows players to perform electronic tracks on CDJ controllers with certain rhythm-matching parameters.



Figure 39. "Sacred Reality" onscreen text (1:11:49)

“Smoke,” utilizing rhythmic elements as the connecting force with these games instead of connecting the melodic content. He maintains a high-energy, but low-tempo, drum n’ bass beat underneath. He seamlessly moves into yet another mashup of Technical Itch & Kemal’s “The Calling” against Aphrodite’s “Bomber,” with the beat from “Nonstop Select,” taken from DDR selection menus, by Naoki Maeda mixed underneath. Again, he emphasizes Virtual Self’s connections to DDR, though this time he reimagines the playing experience itself, drawing on sounds players would have heard while navigating the game prior to or after playing. Technic-Angel’s set moves through these rhythm game references at a much quicker pace than Pathselector did, switching tracks at a rate that reflects the increased tempo of the set.

At approximately the midpoint of technic-Angel’s set, just over ten minutes in, the avatar speaks directly to the audience. She asks the crowd if they know Pathselector’s track “Ghost Voices,” then announces that she will play her remix, “ANGEL VOICES” (Figure 40). Robinson plays nearly the entire “ANGEL VOICES” remix, reinforcing the

stylistic differences between Pathselector and technic-Angel through comparison of the two versions. As the track begins, “Virtual Self” appears onscreen in a variety of fonts, again highlighting the omnipresence of the Virtual Self brand. It is striking that technic-Angel was employed to announce her own track, given Pathselector’s complete silence during his set; it is also worth noting that technic-Angel’s attributed tracks are clumped together, all appearing within a much shorter period of time.

A short breakdown serves as a transition from “Angel Voices” to “Key,” forming the only pair of Virtual Self tracks in the entire set. In this transition, a multitude of the words associated with the pervasive Markovian texts flash across the screen in rapid succession, coordinated with each bass drum hit. These texts also appear as the opening visuals for this version of “Key,” which remains largely unchanged. During the next mashup, Robinson again emphasizes these texts, posing the question “am I eternal?” as the tracks begin (Figure 41). This text glitches across the screen throughout the mashup, occasionally interrupted by words such as “blessed”. This visual theme continues through



Figure 40. technic-Angel directly addresses the audience (1:16:11)

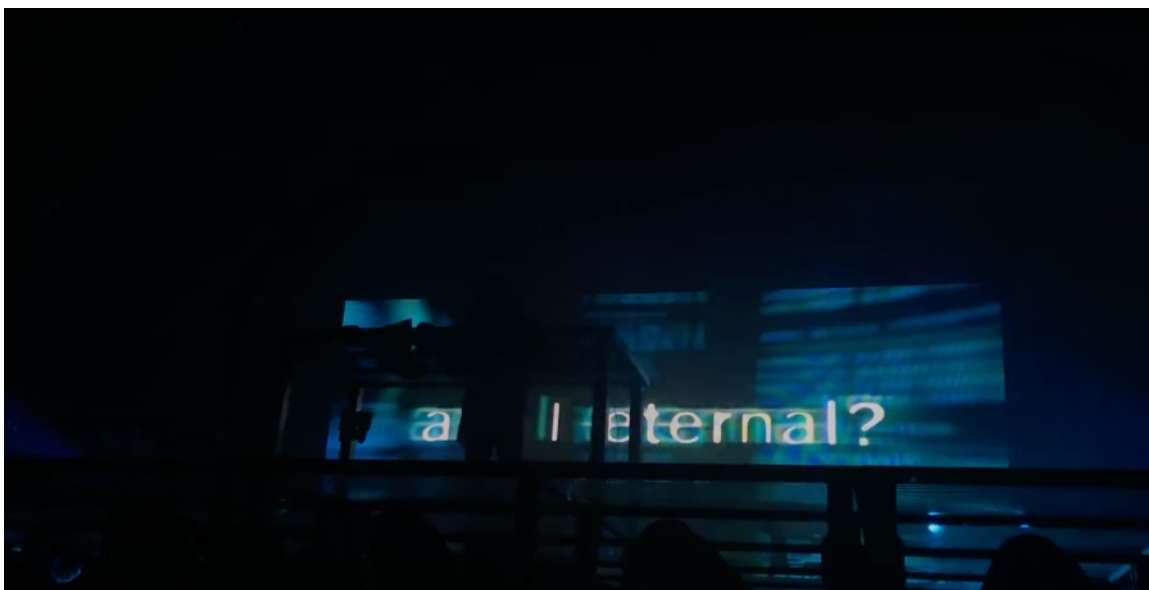


Figure 41. "Am I eternal?" graphic (1:28:33)

yet another track, this time with large bodies of scrolling text occasionally appearing within the digital space.

Technic-Angel's set proper concludes with "Particle Arts." The key visual of magic circles returns during this track; but this return to the cold virtual world is short-lived, as a tree graphic appears in center screen and quickly grows into a beautiful tree with leaves resembling cherry blossoms. Robinson takes a moment here to step away from the decks and admire the on-screen graphics while the music plays out (Figure 42).⁶⁸ This moment can be read both as his own endearment to this project and as a distancing of the human element from music-making. The Virtual Self logo reappears once more, signaling the conclusion of the set proper. Robinson leaves the stage as the Virtual Self logo hovers onscreen.

⁶⁸ Robinson also stepped away from the decks at the same moment during his Seattle performance, indicated that this is a pre-meditated performance decision he likely repeated throughout the tour.



Figure 42. Cherry tree graphic, with Porter sitting at the front of the stage, away from the decks (1:33:38)

In both the Seattle and San Francisco sets, Robinson waited a few minutes as the audience chanted for an encore. Both encores were exactly the same, indicating his anticipation of performing an encore at each tour stop. It is likely that he conceived on this encore as his opportunity to push technic-Angel's sound to its most aggressive extremes, as the tempo again increases. Once again, relentless bass lines dominate the texture and bright reds and oranges flash across the screen. He moves quickly through three tracks by other artists before finishing with "Eon Break," which was also the final track of the EP. Here, some of the brand's most recognizable visuals appear onscreen, including the example with the Markovian texts utilized earlier in this chapter. He again closes out the set with the Virtual Self logo, this time coordinated to appear with the final vocal syllable of "Eon Break." This short, five-minute encore has taken the energy to a new euphoric peak, relentlessly rushing to the finish.

Conclusion

Following the wild success of *Worlds*, Robinson was left with a conundrum – if he was to live up to fans’ expectations of a continued *Worlds* style he would abandon his artistic creativity for repetition of a successful model, but completely deviating from that model under his own moniker could cause him to lose his fan base. His solution was to redirect his energy into a new side-project, Virtual Self. He successfully adopted a new branding model that I call interstitial branding. This model occupies a liminal space between commercial appeal and anti-commercial sentiment. Robinson’s interstitial branding strategy allowed him to accrue subcultural capital by emphasizing his own DIY ethos and sonically hearkening back to dance music’s underground days while simultaneously adopting EDM’s highly commercial branding strategies, such as anonymity and the creation of a second alias. Robinson intentionally draws on nostalgia for turn-of-the-century dance music and rhythm games, establishing strong aesthetic connections to *Dance Dance Revolution*. This video game connection allows him to utilize older dance music styles without inherently tying them to the “functional” contexts of ‘90s raves. He consciously extends this brand narrative to Virtual Self’s live performances, structuring his sets around the two virtual avatars, Pathselector and technic-Angel. His track selection additionally reinforces his brand narrative, appealing to subcultural authenticity through inclusion of the same underground genres he utilized as inspiration for Virtual Self tracks.

This branding model successfully allows Robinson to maintain his fan base without completely subverting his Porter Robinson artist brand. Robinson’s insistence on maintaining separation between the two acts has greatly contributed to this. If the projects

were considered cohesive, his reasons for branching out into a side project may have been called into question. But his adoption of a different branding strategy that allows him to continue appealing to subcultural values as well as his continued interest in video games does allow him to maintain some continuity between his two brand images. This interstitial branding strategy provides a special space in which Robinson can realize both his anti-commercial impulses and artistic desires.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

‘This millennial generation, they want to be connected to a brand,’ a speaker insisted at one point. If they were to be successful, DJs must think like marketing executives and create their own brands, as well as developing eye-catching stage shows and engaging social-media presences, we were also told. As if to illustrate how it could be done, a Skrillex associate called Marshmello was sitting in the middle of some of the panelists with an oversized marshmallow-shaped tub jammed on his head to disguise his identity, looking like nothing less than a human brand.

- Matthew Collin, *Rave On* (176)

Porter Robinson’s Virtual Self project highlights many of the tensions of the electronic dance music industry; though the genre has become highly commercialized in the United States, fans and participants still mythologize the early, underground days of the rave. Music critics such as Simon Reynolds and Matthew Collin bemoan the rise of the EDM industry, deriding the commercial strategies of artists like the helmet-wearing Marshmello and longing for the golden days of the so-called Second British Invasion, or mourning the commercialization of historical sites such as Detroit and Ibiza. Tensions run high between music industry executives, who laud major festivals like the Electric Daisy Carnival or Tomorrowland for their high-paying salaries, and older ravers, who frequently decry that the rave scene just isn’t the same and has lost its PLUR.⁶⁹ Dance music artists must also struggle with the tension of operating as a human brand while simultaneously attempting to release music both they and their fans enjoy.

⁶⁹ PLUR is an acronym that stands for “Peace, Love, Unity, and Respect”. Purportedly originating from ‘90s rave culture, PLUR outlines the four basic values of the dance music subculture. Comments about the scene losing its PLUR can be found on nearly any online rave community, including the Facebook groups “Paradiso Kandi Kids”, “Shambhala Festival Family”, and individual event pages.

In this thesis, I have outlined how Porter Robinson has successfully navigated these tensions with his two dance music projects. Under the Porter Robinson moniker, he adopted an artist brand strategy, emphasizing his personal artistic integrity as a performer. After successfully crafting his artist brand, Robinson found fans' expectations and his own brand narrative stifling; if he wanted to maintain his new fan base his musical options were limited. He circumvented this issue by creating the Virtual Self persona and utilizing an interstitial branding strategy, allowing him to hover between the commercial and anti-commercial spheres while he expanded his musical options. Both of these strategies allowed Robinson to amass subcultural capital, preventing fans from accusing him of selling out and allowing him to release music that maintained his personal artistic integrity without strictly adhering to the *Worlds* sound. I additionally extended this lens beyond iconography and the recorded musical artifact to live performance, illustrating how brand affects musical decisions in both realms. These considerations allow us to connect brand more fully to musical conception and experience, identifying multivalent musical consequences. I suggest that live performance provides Robinson with a particularly fruitful domain to explore both his artistic and brand aesthetic. His carefully crafted performances lend a new dimension to the perceived artistry of both brands, allowing him to curate his sonic brand beyond the albums.

Robinson's successful subversion of suspicions of "selling out" implies that dance music artists have particularly effective branding tools at their disposal. The tradition of DJs obfuscating their identities can at once read as hokey and commercial, or mysterious and appealing. In Robinson's case, navigation of his highly personal artist brand persona

through digital avatars seems to have distanced the human element enough to convince his fans. Creating musical consequences and explanations for the two avatars through stylistic attributions and a set structure evoking the two separate personas appears to have given these brand elements enough context to be explained as artistic choices. Ironically, the promotion of these personas again fits directly within the advice offered to Collin at the industry panel; Robinson created separate Twitter accounts not just for the overarching Virtual Self persona, but for each of the two avatars, creating an engaging social media presence for each entity. Robinson also returns to “functional” dance music, carefully selecting genres that will simultaneously situate Virtual Self as a reaction against mainstream EDM. These decisions contrast with his move away from EDM under his Porter Robinson artist brand and opens up new creative avenues upon return to his main project.

This case illustrates that artists, at least within the dance music genre, are not entirely trapped by a restrictive brand image. There are various options available for negotiating an artistically stifling brand identity, even when a fiercely loyal brand community has formed around an artist’s music. In fact, Robinson’s popularity has continued to grow under both monikers. In 2019, Virtual Self’s “Ghost Voices” was nominated in the category for best dance record at the Grammys. Robinson also launched his own curated festival in Oakland called Second Sky. Ironically, both of these achievements are the markers of success emphasized by the business-minded DJs and producers he denounces. Second Sky, though certainly a unique lineup, is closely modeled on star power-promoted festivals like DJ-producer Excision’s Lost Lands festival; the primary difference here is that Robinson moves away from purely dance

music artists, offering a specially curated multi-genre experience. Currently all signs point to Robinson's continued success. His careful attention to his brand image and appeals to subcultural values have paid off, securing both commercial success and artistic fulfillment.

Project Limitations and Questions for Future Research

This thesis project is relatively limited in scope, as I have only considered the primary and side project of a single musical artist. My primary goal was to explore the branding strategies of Porter Robinson and Virtual Self, suggesting the interstitial branding model and situating branding strategies along a continuum of commercial and anti-commercial appeals. I was unable to account for fan reception of and reactions to these two brands, as conclusions in this vein would require ethnographic work that was not possible within this timeframe. This study would additionally be enhanced by interviews with Porter Robinson himself; since I have been unable to discuss his branding strategies with him, I am only able to make inferences based on his interactions with the media and musical evidence. A more comprehensive study would also provide quantitative measures of success, such as total album sales, full chart histories, and annual income. The study at hand primarily considers branding strategies through a cultural and historical lens, seeking to understand the relationship between economic considerations and musical choices within the contemporary dance music industry

Regardless, there are still ample avenues for future research dealing with the concepts presented here. Further analysis of dance music artists could allow us to draw broader generalizations about this practice. One such study could address Richie Hawtin's multitude of projects, including Plastikman and Concept 1. These studies could

outline similarities to or divergences from the strategy Robinson utilizes for Virtual Self. Other studies might expand the scope outside of artists with multiple aliases. Rebekah Farrugia's hallmark study has already considered negotiations of gender in the branding of amateur female DJs, but yet another study could interrogate negotiations of gender at the level of the global capitalist economy.

A particularly fruitful study would be one that examines dance music brands across the genre's history; how have dance music branding conventions developed and changed over time, and what role does historical context play in determining the strategies an artist utilizes? I have provided some general suggestions throughout this thesis, but such suggestions would benefit from concrete evidence and further contextualization. Even more work could be accomplished in further ethnographic studies, which might more fully account for an artist's conception of their brand and music, or illuminate differences in branding strategies in economies outside of the United States. Scholars could pursue questions such as: how do branding strategies vary on the local, regional, national, and global levels? Do these variances in intended market provide artists with drastically different aesthetic affordances and, if so, what are the underlying forces at work?

Studies on the artist brand and interstitial branding strategy could also prove fruitful in other genres. Such studies might consider the relationship between discourses of authenticity and branding in other countercultural genres such as punk and metal. One such study could address how these discourses affect branding decisions for bands that face membership changes; are these brand images reliant on the perceived authenticity of individual members? When a member of these bands leaves the industry or leaves in

favor of a side project, does the band need to re-imagine their brand image to maintain their success? What can these discourses of authenticity tell us more broadly about branding in these genres?

The continuum of commercial and anti-commercial appeal that I have suggested here also has potential consequences for studies of musical branding on a broader level. As of yet, studies have tended to situate commercialism and anti-commercialism as polar opposites, preventing scholars from considering what happens in between these two extremes. Potential applications of this concept would allow scholars to consider how mainstream popular musicians' brands interact with anti-commercial sentiment. What happens when a mainstream artist co-opts a branding practice that had previously been utilized by underground or indie artists? How do shifts in mainstream branding practices impact the brands of independent musicians? What other branding strategies exist in this middle ground? Many opportunities for the study of branding and music remain; the current study has offered one more lens with which we can understand the relationship between music and the global economy.

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