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Experimenting with the Future of Pop Music Through Play: An Interview with Umru on Open Pit, Minecraft and Hyperpop

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Abstract: Umru is a DJ and music producer who was involved in the initial efforts of Open Pit, an online event producing company that specialized in Minecraft Music Festivals (MMFs) and was active between 2018 and 2020. In this interview, Umru clarifies the process of conceptualizing, building, performing in and interacting with MMFs, while also sharing how his personal connection to music and videogames influenced his positioning in this field. At the end of this conversation, we discuss the concept of hyperpop and how the music scene reacted to being grouped under that umbrella by a major corporation, Spotify. The interview was collected on 19–09–23, through an audio call on Discord.

Keywords: Open Pit, Minecraft, Minecraft Music Festivals (MMFs), hyperpop

Karina: What was your first musical project and when did you start releasing music?

Umru¹: I have a lot of stuff that isn't public anymore that I don't want to have up because now there's a certain amount of a following that I have and it's stuff I was completely experimenting with as a kid. I was putting stuff up on SoundCloud, even if they were experiments or jokes. I was trying to make mash-ups when I was 12 or 13. I definitely made a SoundCloud account in order to post things, but there's been many phases of me taking stuff down as well. So probably when I was 12.

Karina: When did you start interacting with video games and what is your relationship to video games today?

¹ Umru is the stage-name of the estonian-american DJ and music producer. This research was approved by the Ethics Committee at the Universidade Federal Fluminense. Umru has agreed to be quoted by name. More info: <https://umru.dj/>.

Umru: I played fewer games than a lot of people in the same music community. I didn't have access to a lot of stuff. I had this computer that had Ableton² on it, that I got from my dad. It was an old MacBook. It couldn't play most video games, so I would play the things that worked on there. I played a lot of flash games online. At some point, I got super into Minecraft³. It's kind of insane to me how much of a constant that's been in my life. I was definitely very into Minecraft for many, many years. I was interested in the do-it-yourself aspect of Minecraft. There are other games like that, like Atmosphere, which just doesn't exist anymore; games where you would make your own levels for people to play. I was never a developer, but I did like the idea. When I was a kid, I would run a server for my friends [in Minecraft] and be the host. That was part of what I liked about the game and that's what I liked about the content creators that were doing stuff with Minecraft as well. They would make their own stories and make their own things to share that were not part of the game design.

Karina: About Minecraft Music Festivals⁴: when was the first time that you attended one and were you already behind organizing it?

Umru: The first time was when me and my friends did one. A lot of people will say it is the first time that's happened, but I think I've heard that Monstercat⁵ did one. I remember finding out about that after and realizing they did all this stuff that I had no clue how they did it.

Karina: How did you start working with Open Pit⁶ and what was your job while working there?

2 Software for music creation. More info: <https://www.ableton.com/en/>.

3 Gaming-focused virtual world commonly described as digital lego. More info: <https://www.minecraft.net/en-us>

4 Minecraft Music Festivals (MMFs) are events in which the original game sound is deactivated and live audio streaming from Discord or Twitch becomes the soundtrack. MMFs are the result of a synchresis process that connects to the visuals of Minecraft servers in which the players build stages, minigames, collectible items and art galleries and pre-recorded djsets. More on the topic Moritzen, 2022.

5 Canadian Electronic Dance Music label. More info: <https://www.monstercat.com/>.

6 Event producer which organised MMFs from 2018 until 2020. More info: <https://www.openpit.net/>.

Umru: I was there from the beginning before it was Open Pit. The first event was Max Schramp's⁷ birthday party. He was turning 21 in 2018. It was a joke, just a post: "What if I had a Minecraft birthday party?" It was a normal server hosted at his house, on his computer. We built the world, we had all these people prepare sets and immediately when it started, it crashed from the amount of people that wanted to come. We had no clue that anyone would really be joining it. It just couldn't handle it immediately. We spent most of the event trying to figure out how to get it to run again. But I think we basically did get it running and it still felt like a success, even though it was kind of a mess. That's where it came from. This was obviously before the pandemic; it was just a thing we did for fun because we were friends with all this music Twitter community that just wasn't all in one place and we couldn't all meet up and go to a show. We probably couldn't have booked the venue if we wanted to, so it was just a fun, passion project.

Karina: Were you already playing in person DJ sets at that time, or was it something that came afterwards?

Umru: I definitely had played in person shows as well since I was in high school. I lived near New York City but not in the city. I would travel to the city a fair amount to go to shows or to play. It was always pretty small things with friends. I think by the point that we did the Minecraft event, it didn't come out of not playing shows. That came out of wanting to do this thing with my friends that didn't all live in the same place.

Karina: And what was your job when putting the Minecraft festivals together?

Umru: That first one was completely free for all. There was no custom program or anything, it was just a Minecraft server that anyone can set up. That one was planned by Max Schramp. It was his birthday, and he booked all the artists. I was one of the people playing and then I helped build the world that it took place in, and I helped design the merch as well, which was custom skins⁸ of the Minecraft armor, and it was all whatever anyone felt like doing. It was very unorganized. Then the two of us started

⁷ According to Open Pit's website, Schramp was Marketing Lead, Design Lead and General Admin.

⁸ Skins refer to the avatar customization inside gaming virtual worlds.

putting together the next one, which we called “Coalchella”. In that one, there was an A&R role⁹. We were sitting there brainstorming, thinking who we can get because there is none of the limitations of “ohh, this person has a booking rate”, it was never paid. It was always “who do all of us know?”, or “who’s aware of us that we can manage to send in an audio file for this and to get them to play Minecraft?”. As the stuff with Open Pit became more technical in order to deal with the limitations of the game that is not designed to have a bunch of people playing [at the same time, inside the same server], we took on a few key people that really helped to get the technical stuff down, as well as people that were much better at building in Minecraft. Later on, during the pandemic, we had a professional Minecraft map builder join the team, who really helped to do these more ambitious projects. At that point, I was an A&R. I always ended up helping to build the lineups and reach out to people. Everyone was helping build the worlds and come up with the concept. I was also doing a lot of graphic design. I worked on basically all the posters.

Karina: How did you reach out to those artists? Did you know everyone previously? I don’t know if they were at the time, but some of them are now pretty established artists in the EDM¹⁰ scene. How did you approach them?

Umru: Before the pandemic, every single person that played was someone that someone knew on the team and even some were sort of bigger EDM people that we were adjacent with online or I had met them in person. Y2K¹¹, he’s much more established now, but he was already big as a DJ touring. He hung out in these video game music, Internet, Discord¹² communities, he knew a lot of us, even though none of us on the team were especially established musicians. Definitely before the pandemic, 100 % of the lineups were people that someone on our team knew or was at least familiar with enough to reach out. By the time of the second or third show, I had released with PC music¹³, so we had AG Cook playing. He did a set with me at the second one of the Minecraft festivals. A lot of people also think it’s amazing how many of the people that played those are huge now

⁹ Artist and repertoire. In a music label, it means the professional who acts as a liaison between the artists and the company.

¹⁰ Electronic Dance Music.

¹¹ Music producer. More info: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Y2K_\(record_producer\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Y2K_(record_producer)).

¹² Messaging app popular among gamers.

¹³ Music label highly influential for hyperpop. More info: <https://pcmusic.info/>.

and weren't at the time, people like 100gecs¹⁴. They played every single one of our early Minecraft events. No-one had heard of them at that point. I mean, they were known in those SoundCloud spaces, but not the major artists they are today.

Karina: I think in one of the first festivals, they were not even playing as a 100gecs, but as a duo.

Umru: Yeah, they had released the first 100gecs EP. We listed them as their individual names because those were more well known than the name 100gecs; people didn't know it. It was a big part of those lineups. We were combining people that we thought would want to play together or people that we thought would do a fun set together. We had a lot of people where we would book them and everyone would come up with a funny group name for their B2B¹⁵, including myself, I played sets with Fraxiom¹⁶. All these different groups would have joke, funny B2B names and then their group name was just 100gecs. That just happened to be their project that became huge. At the time, it was just another combo name where we would put the actual artist names first because they were more well known. We just put their group name as an extra little bit. It's just wild to think about now.

Karina: Did you ever attend in-game concerts on other platforms, in other games?

Umru: Not until later. I didn't have Fortnite¹⁷ when all the big Fortnite events happened, although I'm a big Fortnite player now. During the pandemic I definitely did some, when other people I knew were organizing events in Second Life. Definitely not before I did the Minecraft ones. It wasn't like I was completely unaware of that existing, but we were doing it because it was a game. The point of it was that the game was kind of funny to everyone, but also it was something that everyone already had. It was the most accessible because no one had to buy it. Most people we knew had played Minecraft at some point and had paid for it.

¹⁴ Highly popular and critically acclaimed hyperpop duo. More info: <https://www.100gecs.com/>.

¹⁵ Back to back, when two djs perform a set together.

¹⁶ Artist and music producer. More info: <https://fraxiom.bandcamp.com/>.

¹⁷ Battle-royale gaming-focused virtual world, in which players compete to be the sole survivor. More info: <https://www.fortnite.com/>.

Karina: Were you active on Discord servers, communities related to Minecraft Music Festivals at the time?

Umru: I wouldn't say I was in the Minecraft community. It was more like a music community. I wasn't a huge Discord user. I was in a lot of private servers of friends where we would play stuff, but it was usually people I knew through music. Open Pit completely came out of one of these servers where there was no specific group and we had to eventually decide who would commit to being a management member of the group. We had to eventually decide who would commit to being a management member once we had done a few festivals and decided to come up with a name and everything. Initially it was very much just people that were hanging out in a call saying "oh, I can help with this". Emma, who you talked to, is now a great friend of mine, and we also worked together a lot on graphic design as "parent company". It was someone that I didn't know at all that just happened to be on this same server as me and was just "oh, I can do web design, I'll make a website. I'll make a web player for the music in the Minecraft event".

Karina: How was the experience of performing at those Minecraft Music Festivals? Would you customize your avatar in any way? Would you be inside the server? Would you be on the stage?

Umru: In almost all of them there were some things that were broken, but the idea was that the DJs would be on the stage. People had such a tolerance for stuff being broken and being fine because the idea of it was at the time so crazy, it was a novelty, "oh, I'm going to perform in Minecraft". It was so fun and crazy to do, even if things were not working that well. The sets weren't live for our Minecraft events, they were pre-recorded sets. I think what's cool about it is that that became the art form. Because it's pre-recorded and really short, we booked so many people and then we do 10, 15-minute sets or 20 maybe for some. It became a new genre of deejaying or creating a set where people took advantage of the fact that it was pre-recorded. It wasn't people just recording themselves deejaying for the most part. I mean, some people would. But a lot of the time, it would be its own thing. People would produce a 20-minute thing of audio with jokes, with vocals, with fake crowd noise. It became this thing that was taking advantage of the fact that even though it wasn't live, what can we do to make it crazier than a live show? And it became a big part of it. I think William Crooks, who played a lot of the events, really nailed down this live feeling in his sets by recording vocals over the whole thing as if he

was on the mic and singing, doing these crazy effects, transitions and stuff that would be hard to replicate as a DJ in a club. I think that's the coolest thing to talk about, because the actual performance wasn't performing. You would just hear your own set and look at the chat and see everyone reacting to it, or you would type stuff in the chat, maybe you'd jump around. It wasn't a live performance, it was just kind of a listening party. But I think the real fun of it was the joy that came from trying to outdo what everyone else was doing with what you were preparing, what crazy songs you could combine. It was so different from deejaying, because I already performed in venues before as well, as a DJ and it's just you. Because it's online, you're not there to make people dance necessarily. It's [about] how to outdo each other with the craziest possible thing you can combine. Also, it wasn't original music. A lot of the time it was people doing mashups and remixes and crazy transitions. It was definitely super formative for the way I deejay. Even though I deejay live most of the time now, there's definitely still a big influence on how I do that and how I think about it.

Karina: Would you be inside the server as your own avatar on the stage, moving it in some specific way? Would it be someone else doing it for you? Or would there be no-one on the stage?

Umru: It would be us, at least for the initial events. Just everyone being on the server at once. There are always problems, people are always getting disconnected. We're always battling against the game that wasn't really designed to have the volume of people in it that we did. In theory, people would work around that. And in theory, you would always be on the stage and people would be watching you. People will try and do all these different gimmicks, have a choreography, which is also really fun. I remember there was one set that Helvetican did specifically where they in the recording had instructions for everyone to run to the left and run to the right. People would work to make it something that was vaguely interactive, even though there's not that much you can really do inside Minecraft.

During the pandemic, we started getting these artists that wouldn't be playing Minecraft shows otherwise, that maybe didn't have Minecraft, but everyone was interested in doing something because they couldn't perform in real life. We started getting a lot of artists who did not play, who didn't have the game, and it became a big part of the job to have people stand in for them. You can't just rename a person, you need to have an account with that name, and you have to buy it. You can only change the username of the Minecraft account

once a month. We had this library of accounts that we accumulated. We would switch the names for each event, whenever we could. Then we would also make skins for all people that didn't play on their own. We had a resident skin designer, vitacocoa¹⁸, an illustrator who was good at doing Minecraft skins. We would go through and ask everyone if they wanted to make their own. For a lot of the artists, for those bigger events that we did during the pandemic, we would have to make them their skins and often stand in for them in the game. We hosted American Football, the band, they're all dads, adults, one of them had their kid playing as him. I remember I was on the phone with one of the members of American Football, trying to teach them how to log into the game. For some, we were just playing as them. The earlier shows were all our friends everywhere. The reason we are doing it in Minecraft was because everyone played Minecraft or had the game at least. When I would play with people, we'd do matching skin designs or we would come up with some funny joke to have as our skins.

Karina: Would you make custom skins? What kind of actions do you do with your avatar, how would you perform at that moment? What would you want to communicate with that skin?

Umru: The fun thing about Minecraft is that someone has already made a skin of anything, and it is freely available online. You can look up a Minecraft skin of a character of any possible thing and someone already made it. When AG Cook¹⁹ and I performed, we figured out an optical illusion skin someone made, it was a checkered board of white and black. Because there are two layers on a Minecraft skin, it would look different based on what angle you were looking at. They still had heads that looked like us on top of that weird, checkered board. The artists would send Vita a photo and we would try to recreate it as well as we could. In later events, we started having custom items, items that people could get for donating, like the wizard hat from 100gecs.

In terms of performing, there's not that much you do in the game. You can type in the chat while you're on stage, people would do a lot of that. They would come up with things for people to chant and stuff like "repeat after me" or the audience would come up with their own text. Most servers are

¹⁸ More on vitacocoa's work: <https://www.instagram.com/vitaimage/>.

¹⁹ Music producer and musician who was one of the co-founders of the PC Music label. More info: <https://pcmusic.info/>.

online things with chats. It's automatic to ban people that are spamming stuff, but we specifically didn't. We had a lot of moderators because a real person would have to decide what was offensive and what was just fun spamming. We encouraged the chat to be spam because it gives you the effect of a crowd that's cheering even though you can't hear that in the event. People would really work around the limitations of it in fun ways. I was just on the phone with Charli [XCX]²⁰ controlling her character and she would tell me what to do and be like, "OK, now jump like this or now type this" because she didn't have the game and couldn't figure out how to play it. We were doing these weird extensions of different very famous artists. There was so much logistical work, it was my first office job. We had a spreadsheet for what time different people had to stand in for different artists. It was insane, the level of organization we had to do.

Karina: Would you go around the server and explore, do the mini games and mini quests, or would you be hanging around next to the stage?

Umru: We were always doing something. I was the artist communicator. Artists would join the game and log in and they wouldn't know how to get to the stage. The same thing as a real music venue, I would have to tell them what to do. The stages were off limits to normal people. We're usually teleporting the artists onto the stage.

I was around for whenever we were building the maps, I would already know what the different elements of the map were, and I would have seen them as they're being built. We would have a pretty big group of people building stuff just to make sure there was enough in the world to entertain people for hours. You can listen to the music at any point, you don't need to stand and watch the artist in order to hear the music. A lot of people would be exploring the world, and we would build it that way. There were parkour challenges and things you could find if you explored. There were times when I would also have time to wander around and I would find stuff that I didn't know had been built by different people. The audience experience was always meant to be: you don't have to stand in one spot, you can go do stuff and still listen to the music. A big part of it during the pandemic as we started streaming the shows so that you wouldn't have to play the game. We always streamed the audio. The audio was never actually in the game. We always streamed on a website. We started

²⁰ British pop diva and recent Grammy nominee. More info: <https://www.charlixcx.com/>.

streaming the video to Twitch as well, and that started being more popular than the actual end game thing, because there are lots of people that didn't have Minecraft that would want to watch it. A big part of that was also whoever was the cameraman. I was never filming it, streaming it myself, but we would also try and show the world off to people rather than just have the stage the whole time, we'd have people, the camera person flying around the world, showing what's going on.

Karina: What do you think is the difference between experiencing the festival from inside the server and watching it on Twitch?

Umru: We did build a lot of things that were interactive. We had a lot of things you could find. Once you found a certain item, you could wear it as a merch item, it would be applied to your character even if you logged out. We tried our best to make it really not just a visual thing where you go around and look at it, but you could also interact with. We did a lot of photo-ops²¹, things that people would think are funny. We did the galleries that Elena curated, in most of the events we had an art gallery. We tried to really encourage people to play if they could, but obviously it makes sense that some people would want to watch it. We tried to build enough things that were actually interactive with the gameplay of the game, even though the point was you could just go there and watch something happen.

Karina: When was the first time you ever heard the term hyperpop?

Umru: It was the name of a label ages ago, Fraxiom was on a label called Hyperpop in 2017/2018 and at some point I remember hearing it used to describe PC music as a description of what kind of music they make, before the Spotify era²², the playlist. It definitely had been said before. I remember the people that used to run the label having a pretty crazy reaction to it becoming this whole thing. It definitely predated the term as a Spotify genre, it was just what they called it. In general, the idea is this pop music, obviously stemming from PC music, all these people were inspired by PC, but there were other labels, desktop, intentionally using pop music to describe not literally chart-topping pop music, but stuff that's playing with

²¹ Photo opportunities. The organizers prepare places where the concert-goers can take print-screens of themselves at the event.

²² Spotify grouped many artists under a playlist titled "hyperpop" in 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/10/arts/music/hyperpop-spotify.html>

the idea of what pop music could be. People were very into that idea in this era, before it started being called Hyperpop as well.

Karina: How would you describe it and what do you think about the term itself?

Umru: It became a descriptor for a lot of different music. This is how a lot of genres get made. I've just read this book that describes how both techno and house had to be packaged that way, they had to be given a name because they were being released by a record label and had to be introduced to an audience with a certain name. It's the exact same story where some commercial interest had to come up with a way to brand a type of music that was just naturally happening. It happens with all genres of music, but I think it definitely felt kind of crazy for a lot of the people that were getting roped into it or getting described under this title because no-one was claiming it. No-one was saying "this is what I make". It was completely a label that lots of people were grouped into and I think there was a lot of music that was similar, that was using pitched up vocals or using auto tune and using catchy pop music tropes or things that would have previously been considered cringe or uncool, being intentionally used in a new way, or the fact that it was prevalent on the Internet. For a lot of artists who were not necessarily influenced by PC music getting all these articles written about them saying, "oh, there's a whole new generation of music influenced by PC music" and getting boxed into things that they weren't necessarily identifying with and having to compete for an audience or a space with much more established musicians, having Charli XCX taking up playlist slot from some 14 year old kid who is just making music with their friends on the Internet and then suddenly, because they're not on a playlist, they're losing money that next month. It was a very crazy combination of things. There was a label called that, but still I don't think many people were going around saying this is what genre of music I make until it became the name of a playlist.

Karina: Are you bothered to be put under this label?

Umru: Sort of. People are reluctant to give a platform like Spotify the power to say that this is what this genre of music is called, what these many different genres of music are all called. People were always joking about it, including in lots of music that I worked on, it was a constant thing to joke about or poke fun at, that this is what it was being called. I have always enjoyed playing with the idea of pop music. Until recently, I don't think I would say a lot of my music has the hyper tendencies that some artists that are called hyperpop do. A lot of the

influence comes from stuff like nightcore, where it was sped-up pop music, popular songs played faster and higher pitched. In terms of a word, I guess that's a good descriptor for that kind of thing. I wouldn't even say that most of the music that I was making was especially fast or sped up or hyper in the sense that it was too fast to dance to. A lot of artists that I know really were legitimately interested in making music that was pop, that could be pop music, that was experimental in some way, but still the goal was not to reach a niche experimental audience, the goal was to make pop songs that were accessible to a wide variety of people rather than specifically be like created as a sub-genre or a niche community thing; just playing with the tropes of what pop music even is, because it's never been a genre. Pop has never been a musical style, it's just been a term used to describe what is popular and that has endlessly shifted. Even over really short periods of time, the things that are at the top of music charts are influenced by all sorts of genres and is constantly changing. I would at least in some sense call my music pop music, even if it's not popular music. I think that a lot of stuff I've worked on was created with that as the goal. Rather than saying I'm trying to fill it, I'm trying to do a specific sub-genre, a very specific sound for a specific niche, I think a lot of my efforts have been bringing various experimental music production ideas or even different artists together into making something that had a pop accessibility to it.

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