

## **A New Platform for Performance: How game worlds are becoming the future of musical performance.**

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The concert is about to begin, and the crowd gathers as the lights dim. Everyone is dressed in elaborate costumes. A panda shifts from foot to foot as a fish in a spacesuit breakdances with a sushi chef. Many wear white and carry speakers on a stick while others spin giant pickaxes around their heads. As the music starts to play, millions of onlookers jump. Gravity changes in time with the beat, allowing people to project into the air, float and fly around the stage. Showers of particles fall from the sky like meteors and giant yellow beachballs rain down on the crowd, who swing wildly at them, sending them spiralling upwards into the clouds. As the set finishes, the ground disappears, taking the stage with it, and everyone skydives down into a suburban town hundreds of metres below. This strange set of events is not happening at an extreme sports festival or even *Burning Man*, but instead within the new frontier of music venues: *Fortnite*, a videogame world.

At first, game environments may not appear natural hosts for concerts and music, with no physical materials and thus no acoustic performance beyond the simulation of sounds. Rather than hosting static audiences, they typically promote participation in specific actions, whether shooting, racing, building or managing. Yet modern game worlds are complex interactive environments that bring people from across the globe together in their thousands and respond in real time to their behaviour. And many games do have an implicit link to music, from *WipEout's* (1995) techno soundtrack, to *Rez* (2001) and *Vib-Ribbon* (1999) with worlds structured by beats, *Guitar Hero* (2005) which turned living rooms into stages, and of course the *Grand Theft Auto* (1997-2013) series which has long featured radio stations curated by artists such as Iggy Pop, Soulwax and Flying Lotus. *GTA* recently moved into online performances, allowing players to buy virtual nightclubs that others can visit, and hire real-world DJs to play them such as Solomun and Tale of Us. These DJs in turn have used Los Santos, *GTA V's* deviant recreation of Los Angeles, to record music videos and release new tracks, reaching wide new audiences through this virtual world. Taking this interplay further, Riot Games, developer of the popular *League of Legends* (2009)—a five against five hero battle game, created a virtual pop group

*K/DA* comprised of game characters voiced by Korean K-pop stars and American YouTube singers. Their song *POP/STARS* launched the game's 2018 World Championships, using augmented reality to bring the game characters to life. The song was designed to sell 'skins', in-game costumes that players could buy, but it also rose high in pop charts showing the appetite for crossover experiences sitting between music and game culture.

In this context, February of this year saw Epic Games, developers of the game phenomenon *Fortnite* (2017), stage arguably the most ambitious live music performance in a virtual world to date. *Fortnite* is a *battle royale* game, where 100 players drop from the sky and fight to be the last person standing in an ever-shrinking level. Players can also construct modular structures in the world to access new areas or hide from enemies, and the best players are good at both shooting and building. The game is tied to musical culture through in-game dances used for players to 'emote' to others. These usually reference popular culture including Snoop Dogg, Irish jigging, *Seinfeld* and *Scrubs*. *Fortnite* dances have themselves become iconic, with various footballers at the 2018 FIFA World Cup performing them in celebration, including Frenchman Antoine Griezmann in the final itself.

This integration of music and dance continued when it was announced that US-based DJ Marshmello was to hold a live in-game concert broadcast across *Fortnite*'s servers, reaching millions of players. However, when the event arrived, the venue appeared somewhat unremarkable, typical of stages we find erected across parks every summer and nothing like, say, one of Mark Fisher's famously exuberant set designs. But this is also a videogame world, and games regularly play with space in weird ways. As the concert approached, players built floating structures to gain a better view and practiced dance moves. And then Marshmello appeared. Over the next ten minutes, the stage, crowd and even the world itself became a performance. The intensity of the virtual space steadily grew alongside the breaks and rises in the music. The world performed in tandem with the DJ. This could happen because game technologies excel at incorporating different types of information into one environment. A game like *Fortnite* is a layered space of programmed logics, art and 3D modelled architecture, written narratives and interface design. Sound sources must be positioned, physics simulated, and objects must be assigned 'colliders', invisible boundaries to stop the player falling out of the world. Epic and Marshmello

manipulated all these elements in real time for over 10 million people at once. This suggests a form of all-encompassing spatial performance, where festivals of the future could embrace responsive, layered virtual environments that have a huge reach – provided the digital infrastructure is in place, which many games already have. *Fortnite*'s recent launch of an island dedicated to American rock band Weezer, suggests music will continue to be part of the game's development.

However, performances in games and virtual spaces have been happening for some time. In 2006, American singer Suzanne Vega released her album with a live concert in *Second Life*, an online virtual world that has hosted many such performances. *Duran Duran Universe* is the British band's own island within the world, including a lipstick-shaped skyscraper and a cinema for their music videos. *Second Life* was a particularly suitable host given how user-driven it is. As a sandbox environment, a free-roaming world with few restrictions, people can place self-built 3D models and code into the world and design events around their own desires. In a more contemporary context, this DIY spirit is best embodied by *Minecraft*. The block building game has become a piece of design software in its own right, forged by the creativity of its (over 90 million) regular players. Given this, it perhaps less surprising that some of the largest and most experimental virtual music events have taken place on this platform, lasting much longer than ten minutes.

The largest *Minecraft*-based music event to date is *Fire Festival*, which was held over two days in January this year. The team behind it, including Max Schramp, were also responsible for last year's *Coachella* festival. *Fire* was held over two days and included artists such as British producers Hudson Mohawke (who scored the game *Watchdogs 2*) and A.G. Cook. As Schramp explains, the idea of virtual music venue "started last May, when I decided to have my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday party in *Minecraft*." As Schramp and his friends partied in a custom-built mansion, other events took place that demonstrated the game's emergent potential for gatherings. "People had run off into the desert during the party and then built an underground club and started their own show" Schramp recalls. At *Fire*, the public was not allowed to shape the world, but a 20-strong team of builders were given carte-blanche to experiment on the environment, along with artists playing the festival. Performers built their own houses amongst a postmodern landscape full of references to pop culture and corporate branding. For Schramp this hyperreal environment reflected

the festival's collaborative ethos, and he argues that "the huge collage that is created between visual artists, people who play Minecraft and musicians is super interesting." As with most videogame spaces, *Fire's* environment used peaks and dips in intensity to keep the visitors interested over two 7-hour long days of music.

Interestingly, although we have seen that virtual worlds can incorporate many different experiential layers into a performance beyond simply recreating reality, Schramp argues that the stage retains an important role. Because "this crazy world doesn't have gravity" it is helpful to have "one real anchor point that you actually see to help with the immersion". Of course, there are over two millennia of embedded cultural history in theatres and stages, and for the *Fire* team they still play an important role in creating the sense of being at a festival and distinguishing the performer from the blocky crowds dancing below. Even if the stage is on a floating volcano, suspended over a mile-wide pool of lava.

Perhaps what surprised Schramp and his team the most was that although Minecraft was the "platform we know best right now" for realising such an ambitious event, the audience itself was not "just gamers, it was more just fans of electronic music and music in general. That is something we didn't really expect." One of the reasons for such broad audiences comes from Minecraft being a supremely accessible game. Likewise, *Fornite* is free-to-play. It is a showcase for Epic's *Unreal* game engine software, which along with rival *Unity* is being increasingly adopted by architects and designers to visualise buildings in VR. As this happens, the game design and architecture professions inch closer. Yet the architectural potential of these worlds is so much richer and involves the full audiovisual and interactive spectrum. If Schramp and Epic have their way, the future of music performance will be embedded in worlds where buildings can dance, weather changes to musical pitch, and even time itself can be remixed.