

# When Donald Trump Dropped the Bass: The Weaponization of Dubstep in Internet Trolling Strategies, 2011–2016

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## Abstract

This article argues that in the age of social media, the affective power of music can dare listeners to become complicit with misogyny and right-wing populism. It investigates the weaponization of dubstep in internet trolling strategies by examining the genre's relationship with a type of user-generated content called 'Major League Gaming [MLG] Montage Parodies'. Mixing musical and audiovisual analysis with digital methods, the article considers the origins of MLG Montage Parodies and then investigates the content's development from 2011 to 2016. As a memetic timbral topic, the dubstep drop was initially deployed in MLG Montage Parodies as a form of pubescent power play to troll young male gamers. But then in 2014, it was redeployed as anti-feminist ammunition amid the toxic masculinity of #GamerGate. Finally, it was weaponized by alt-right trolls during the 2015–2016 'Great Meme War' that accompanied the US Presidential Race. The closing remarks reflect on the ethical, ontological, and disciplinary implications of the research and issue a call for memetic musical literacy.

In the early hours of 13 October 2015, Donald Trump retweeted a YouTube link. In this video, titled 'You Can't Stump the Trump (Volume 4)',<sup>1</sup> Trump is cast as a predatory insect due to the prominent use of the dubstep track 'Centipede' by Knife Party.<sup>2</sup> As the camera zooms in on Trump standing at a podium during a Republican debate, the introduction to 'Centipede' delivers hissing rainforest ambiance in the canopy of the frequency spectrum, while guitar power chords (D♯–A♯) sound unnervingly edgy due to a dissonant upper A♯. A male voice-over from an American nature documentary intones that 'despite its impressive length, it's a nimble navigator, and some can be highly venomous'. This is followed by an interjection from

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This article contains offensive language and references to online misogyny.

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1 Comrade Stump, 'You Can't Stump the Trump (Volume 4)', *YouTube*, 2015, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=MKH6PAoUuD0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MKH6PAoUuD0).

2 Knife Party, 'Centipede', on *Rage Valley EP*, digital download, EARSTORM, 002, 825646581917, 2012.

the ‘nimble navigator’ himself, who raises his finger and proclaims, ‘all I’m doing is telling the truth’. Trump’s charm is deceptive, however, as the voiceover reveals: ‘just like the tarantula it’s killing, the centipede has two curved hollow fangs, which inject paralysing venom. This centipede is a predator.’ A tension-inducing buildup then begins, comprising an oscillating semitone *Jaws* rip-off coupled with a rising EQ sweep. The YouTube user is then held in suspense when the music cuts out before the bass drop. Trump injects his paralysing venom into Rand Paul through a one-line put-down (‘I think you heard me – you’re having a hard time tonight’) before the track’s powerful re-entry casts this as an unanswerable ‘mic drop’. As money rains down, the centipede commands a journalist to ‘go back to Univision’ (the American Spanish-language television network). His prey is gunned down by a sniper rifle coupled with the appropriate sound effect, incisive semiquaver figures, and the red text ‘#Stumped’. Finally, Trump’s sleazy slur regarding Rosie O’Donnell (who he had previously described as a ‘fat pig’) is synchronized with the bassline’s flatulent descending chromaticism.

What on earth was going on here? Why had Trump chosen to promote this puerile user-generated content – and why had its creator chosen dubstep for the opening sequence? In the resulting thread of tweets,<sup>3</sup> numerous users expressed their disbelief at the sheer audacity of Trump’s retweet. However, others noticed that the video’s distinctive mix of dubstep drops, visual memes, and first-person shooter (FPS) game elements revealed it to be an instance of a ‘Major League Gaming [MLG] montage parody’, a distinctive type of androcentric user-generated content that had risen to prominence several years earlier. Play had become political. Through the production and Trump-endorsed consumption of this video, the dubstep drop was no longer a timbral topic involved in niche subcultural trolling having just become an inflammatory weapon used to silence centrist ‘cucks’ and ‘social justice warriors’ (SJWs). As many content creators and consumers began to realize, the canon of MLG Montage Parody memes and dubstep tracks had been hijacked by the alt-right. Framed as a malicious-yet-mirthful supervillain from an FPS game, Trump appeared to be dropping the bass as an explosive truth bomb.

Knife Party’s ‘Centipede’ was used in many of the other videos in the ‘Can’t Stump the Trump’ YouTube series, gaining millions of views across thirty episodes and becoming an anthemic musical meme for the alt-right and less radical Trump supporters alike. In a basic sense, musical memes are catchy clips or soundbites that can be found in imitative and mostly audiovisual user-generated content, with Reddit and YouTube being important ‘breeding grounds’ for musical memes online. But notwithstanding the connotations of contagious replication and virality that haunt the term ‘meme’, it is important to realize that web users *do things* with musical memes – their spread and mutation depends on human agency and (re)invention. In the case of ‘Centipede’, the dubstep drop was plucked from the memetic world of MLG Montage Parodies and repurposed as musical propaganda in the ‘Great Meme War’<sup>4</sup>

3 The thread is available at <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/653856168402681856?lang=en> (accessed 20 December 2023).

4 The ‘Great Meme War’ took place during the US presidential race of 2015–2016 across multiple social media platforms. The main belligerents were supporters of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, who used various memes to target their opponents and endorse their political figureheads. The rhetoric of memetic warfare was mainly championed

having been weaponized by a self-professed Trump fan. As encoded information, musical memes can also convey more implicit and obfuscated kinds of meaning when heard by listeners who possess niche vernacular knowledge of the (anti)social web.<sup>5</sup> Some web users would have heard the ‘Centipede’ dubstep drop not only as a mic drop or a truth bomb on the part of Donald Trump but also as ‘ear rape’. In a basic sense, ‘ear rape’ is a vernacular net-native term ‘used to define distorted or very loud sound clips or songs that pop out on YouTube or flash videos, generally screamers, YouTube poops, or montage parodies’.<sup>6</sup> Yet from a more critical vantage point, ear rape can be regarded as a rhetorical term for the sonification of toxic masculinity and online misogyny. In some ways, the dubstep drop has become the very sound of the manosphere – its memetic reputation means that it is often heard as aggressive, androcentric audio.

Unlike the groovy continuity and process pleasure associated with canonical electronic dance music genres,<sup>7</sup> the bass drop in dubstep constitutes a moment of rupture and has even contributed to theorizations of ‘sonic warfare’.<sup>8</sup> In dubstep tracks, the drop functions less as a return to a rewarding and steady musical framework<sup>9</sup> and much more as a trigger for feelings of shock and ritualized disgust. At music festivals in the United States, the dubstep drop is a sensationalized moment associated with a disgusted visage termed ‘the bass face’, the act of vomiting, and an aghast response characterized by shouts of ‘What the Fuck?!’.<sup>10</sup> The most distinctive timbral topic heard at the onset of the dubstep drop is commonly termed ‘tear-out bass’ or ‘wobble bass’, something that sounds as though it transgresses its own confines. This debased bass is literally ‘de-bassed’ through automated filtering that rapidly ‘opens up’ and then ‘closes’ the sound. Typically, this effect is produced by using a low frequency oscillator (LFO) to modulate the cut-off threshold of a low-pass filter; the sound is often approximated as ‘wubwubwub’ or ‘wobwobwob’ in online spaces. Significantly, the sheer ‘bassweight’

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by Trump supporters. See, for instance, Maxime Dafaure, ‘The “Great Meme War”: The Alt-Right and Its Multifarious Enemies’, *Angles* 10 (2020), 2.

- 5 With the term ‘(anti)social web’, I allude both to the *networked individualism* that defines the West’s present social operating system and to critical work on internet trolling, online misogyny, and networked racism during the 2010s. See, for instance, Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman, *Networked: The New Social Operating System* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012); Emma Jane, *Misogyny Online: A Short (and Brutish) History* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2017); Whitney Phillips, *This Is Why We Can’t Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015); Dhiraj Murthy and Sanjay Sharma, ‘Visualizing YouTube’s Comment Space: Online Hostility as a Networked Phenomena’, *New Media & Society* 21/1 (2018), 192.
- 6 Shinyditto12, ‘Ear Rape’, *Know Your Meme*, 2010, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/ear-rape>.
- 7 Mark Butler, *Unlocking the Groove: Rhythm, Meter, and Musical Design in Electronic Dance Music* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006); Luis-Manuel Garcia, ‘On and On: Repetition as Process and Pleasure in Electronic Dance Music’, *Music Theory Online* 11/4 (2005).
- 8 Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010).
- 9 Ragnhild Torvanger Solberg, ‘“Waiting for the Bass to Drop”: Correlations between Intense Musical Experiences and Production Techniques in Build-Up and Drop Sections of Electronic Dance Music’, *Dancecult* 6/1 (2014), 66.
- 10 Edward Katrak Spencer, ‘Music to Vomit to: The Dubstep Drop, the Bass Face, and the Sound of the Social Web’, in *Cultural Approaches to Disgust and the Visceral*, ed. Max Rynnänen, Heidi S. Kosonen, and Susanne C. Ylönen (New York: Routledge, 2022), 165.

of the dubstep drop has been heard to specify macho ‘hardness’, and tear-out bass has been cast as ‘the affective catalyst and effective backdrop for the emergence of an unabashedly assertive, physically domineering, and adrenaline-addicted “bro” culture’.<sup>11</sup> Although such accounts risk gendered essentialism and underemphasize the increasing participation of women as the genre grew,<sup>12</sup> it is nonetheless the case that dubstep’s reputation for timbral testosterone became reified through the use of the pejorative term ‘brostep’,<sup>13</sup> while the drop’s gendered affordances often ‘do play out in relatively predictable ways’ at male-dominated club nights.<sup>14</sup>

The post-2010 take-up of the drop by internet trolls underscores and furthers dubstep’s androcentrism. Much like dubstep, trolling has been theorized as an androcentric phenomenon<sup>15</sup> and has also been regarded as a euphemism for online misogyny and toxic masculinity.<sup>16</sup> Although the term ‘trolling’ was first used as strategic jargon by US fighter pilots during the Vietnam War (as in the phrase ‘trolling for MiGs’), following the advent of the World Wide Web it became a catchall term for deceiving, baiting, and targeting other users in online fora.<sup>17</sup> At one end of this trolling continuum there exist (relatively) harmless uses of transgressive humour and joshing banter (kudos trolling)<sup>18</sup> as well as the sharing of inane, obscene, or offensive material for the sake of attention (shitposting). At the other end of the scale, there are instances of deliberately hurtful speech and calculated manipulation strategies – a category of behaviour I term ‘target trolling’.<sup>19</sup> Target trolling attempts to cajole us into laughing mercilessly at a specific other, often enticing the web user to become complicit with misogyny or racism in the process. Critically, musical trolling shifts between kudos trolling, shitposting, and target trolling, thus necessitating close examination of its perverse malleability.

In order to understand how trolls claimed the dubstep drop, this article examines three phases of musical trolling from 2011 to 2016. It shows how the dubstep drop was initially

11 Mike D’Errico, ‘Going Hard: Bassweight, Sonic Warfare, & the “Brostep” Aesthetic’, *Sounding Out!* (Sound Studies Blog), 2014, <https://soundstudiesblog.com/2014/01/23/going-hard-bassweight-sonic-warfare-the-brostep-aesthetic/>; Mike D’Errico, ‘Electronic Dance Music in the Dubstep Era’, *Oxford Handbooks Online*, 2015, [www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935321.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199935321-e-74](http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935321.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199935321-e-74).

12 Jace Clayton, ‘Brostep, Mansplained’, *Mudd up!* (blog), 2014, [www.negrophonic.com/2014/brostep-mansplained/](http://www.negrophonic.com/2014/brostep-mansplained/).

13 In 2014, the UK dubstep pioneer Skream made a conscious decision to move away from the genre because it had become ‘such testosterone-fuelled music’. In THUMP, ‘Skream – Come With Me (Documentary)’, *YouTube*, 2014, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=JUrde21uRPc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JUrde21uRPc), 2.44 ff., my transcription. See also Carrie Battan, ‘Echo Chamber: James Blake: Dubstep Producer Rails against Genre’s Emerging “Frat-boy Market”’, *Pitchfork*, 28 September 2011, <http://pitchfork.com/news/44141-echo-chamber-james-blake/>.

14 Christabel Stirling, “Beyond the Dance Floor”? Gendered Publics and Creative Practices in Electronic Dance Music’, *Contemporary Music Review* 35/1 (2016), 134, original emphasis.

15 Phillips, *This Is Why We Can’t Have Nice Things*, 42.

16 Emma Jane, ‘Flaming? What Flaming? The Pitfalls and Potentials of Researching Online Hostility’, *Ethics and Information Technology* 17/1 (2015), 83.

17 Jonathan Bishop, ‘Representations of “Trolls” in Mass Media Communication: A Review of Media-Texts and Moral Panics Relating to “Internet Trolling”’, *International Journal of Web Based Communities* 10/1 (2014), 8.

18 Bishop, “Internet Trolling”, 9.

19 Edward Katrak Spencer, ‘From Contagion to Imitation: On Bass Drop Memes, Trolling Repertoires, and the Legacy of Gabriel Tarde’, in *Remediating Sound: Repeatable Culture, YouTube and Music*, ed. Holly Rogers, Joana Freitas, and João Francisco Porfírio (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), 52.

deployed in MLG Montage Parodies as a form of pubescent power play to troll young male gamers before the musical trolling became more akin to shitposting. Then, in 2014, the drop was redeployed as anti-feminist ammunition amid the online harassment of #GamerGate, a Twitter hashtag created in response to a dispute about digital games journalism that quickly became an online movement characterized by toxic masculinity. In this instance, the musical trolling oscillated between shitposting and target trolling, with the dubstep drop having become recast as ‘ear rape’. Finally, the dubstep drop was weaponized by alt-right trolls during the 2015–2016 ‘Great Meme War’ that accompanied the US presidential race. Target trolling prevailed, although the dubstep drop’s previous associations with shitposting ensured that a smokescreen of plausible deniability surrounded this final phase of musical trolling.<sup>20</sup> The contribution of the androcentric dubstep drop to *anti-social* web practices problematizes the prosocial reputation of electronic dance music, something often communicated through the idealized rhetoric of Peace, Love, Unity, and Respect (PLUR). I contend that rather than choreographing a halcyon kind of selflessness and oneness, the dubstep drop can dare web users to become complicit with misogyny and right-wing populism despite themselves. This idea of musical complicity presents a problem for electronic dance music scholars, research on music and online cultures, and musicology more broadly, since it identifies a darker side to musical entrainment and musical humour. In the age of social media, the affective power of music can make listeners complicit with hateful and violent online movements, a scenario which demands both critical investigation and ethical reflection.

In order to investigate the use of the dubstep drop in internet trolling strategies, I adopt a *web-based* approach, in two senses of the term. First, the article wrangles with the multiple entanglements and fractal mediations (social, cultural, and political mediations; audiovisual and online–offline entanglements) with which the dubstep drop is emmeshed, and weaves previously unconnected threads from internet studies into the analyses of these webs. Second, by bringing qualitative and quantitative digital methods to bear on the sound of dubstep’s online mediation, the article pursues *internet-mediated ways of listening*.<sup>21</sup> Within the social sciences generally and internet studies in particular, retrieval and analysis techniques are often understood through the metaphor of ‘mining’ data. In contrast, I present the results of a musicological experiment that departs from the ‘big data mining’ paradigm by reframing discourse analysis as a kind of listening. The research attends to the incomplete echoes of user utterances in online spaces and in doing so follows Lisa Blackman’s call for explorations of

20 For complementary perspectives on plausible deniability in relation to music’s involvement with anti-feminist and alt-right sentiments online, see Sam de Boise, ‘Music and Misogyny: A Content Analysis of Misogynistic, Antifeminist Forums’, *Popular Music* 39/3–4 (2020); Sam de Boise, ‘Digitalization and the Musical Mediation of Anti-Democratic Ideologies in Alt-Right Forums’, *Popular Music and Society* 45/1 (2022).

21 Georgina Born and Christopher Haworth, ‘From Microsound to Vaporwave: Internet-Mediated Musics, Online Methods, and Genre’, *Music and Letters* 98/4 (2018); Eric Clarke, *Ways of Listening: An Ecological Approach to the Perception of Musical Meaning* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Edward Katrak Spencer, ‘Web-based Ways of Listening: Reinventing Empirical Musicology in the Age of Social Media’, in *New Methods and New Challenges in Empirical Musicology*, ed. Fanny Gribenski and Clément Canonne (in preparation).

‘small’ and ‘haunted’ data.<sup>22</sup> Such work identifies different groups of voices that possess contrasting beliefs, priorities, and motivations within and between decaying threads of replies. Further, web scripts that amplify broader sets of opinion data on social web platforms via application programming interfaces (API) allow one to listen to and acquire knowledge of the online environment and (sub)cultural milieu in which the dubstep drop exists. This methodological orientation therefore shares Steven Feld’s concern with ways-of-knowing-through-sound or ‘acoustemology’, a term he coined following fieldwork in the Bosavi rainforest region of Papua New Guinea.<sup>23</sup> In this instance, the environment under consideration is a complex media ecosystem that involves both exchange (the sharing of memes, track lists, and insider jokes) and musical weaponization, so it becomes important to consider how the relationality and physicality of sound is involved in online experience and interpretation.<sup>24</sup> By listening to the ways that users listen, behave, and interact with one another, it becomes possible to (re)conceptualize relationships between sound structure and social structure<sup>25</sup> and to better understand the contradictory ways in which one is made to listen to the dubstep drop – and internet-mediated timbral topics more broadly – as a web user. The digital apparatus used to support this endeavour is relatively modest compared with tools used in more recent work, though it should be noted that all of my web-based research to date has drawn upon user-friendly interfaces developed with humanities scholars in mind. Specifically, to detail the nuts and bolts of this apparatus, the article listens to haunted user utterances in the subreddits *r/montageparodies* and *r/The\_Donald* using the Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine and performs quantitative analysis of ‘Trump versus Clinton’ within the MLG Montage Parody battleground of the ‘Great Meme War’ using Mike Thelwall’s Mozdeh software.<sup>26</sup>

Through this web-based experimentation, the article intervenes in ongoing debates about the future of music studies. Methodologically, it aims to demonstrate that digital methods can serve critical ends and need not undermine or replace the more hermeneutic and interpretative modes of inquiry that have traditionally flourished in music studies and the humanities

22 Lisa Blackman, ‘The Haunted Life of Data’, in *Compromised Data: From Social Media to Big Data*, ed. Ganaele Langlois, Joanna Redden, and Greg Elmer (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 248.

23 For an overview of acoustemology as a theoretical concept, see Steven Feld, ‘Acoustemology’, in *Keywords in Sound*, ed. David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

24 Feld, ‘Acoustemology’, 13. Importantly, my invocation of acoustemology is not intended to counter ocularcentrism with sonocentrism, and Feld is also at pains to distance himself from ‘essentialist sensory masterplans’ (‘Acoustemology’, 14).

25 Steven Feld, ‘Sound Structure as Social Structure’, *Ethnomusicology* 28/3 (1984). In recent work on sonic tactility and affect in electronic dance music, Luis-Manuel Garcia suggests that a threshold between individual sonic particles and smooth tone might dramatize a similar threshold between individual dancers and a crystallized crowd. Dismissals of such an idea as too essentialist are unhelpful, since these critiques foreclose careful consideration of specific relationships between sound and sociality. The article at hand can be read as an attempt to recuperate and recalibrate a Feldian approach through its interrogation of relationships between the sonic and the (anti)social. See Luis-Manuel Garcia, ‘Beats, Flesh, and Grain: Sonic Tactility and Affect in Electronic Dance Music’, *Sound Studies* 1/1 (2015), 73.

26 See, for instance, Mike Thelwall, *Introduction to Webometrics: Quantitative Web Research for the Social Sciences* (San Rafael, CA: Morgan & Claypool, 2009).

more broadly. Theoretically, it presents a reimagining of music's ontological status in the age of social web platforms. Conceptualized as an internet meme,<sup>27</sup> the dubstep drop's power lies not only in its affectivity, but also in its entanglements with explicit ideas, meanings, and worldviews. A web-based approach does not prescribe in advance what music is worthy of study, nor does it foreclose close attention to musical material, and the article is often concerned with the cross-modal perception of specific timbral qualities. Yet since the dubstep drop is a meme that has been (ab)used by web users in various ways to target various others, it is also necessary to analyse how it has been 'carried, rolled, squeezed, bounced, kicked and thrown' over the course of its travels,<sup>28</sup> eventually fulfilling the new function of magnetizing floating voters to Donald Trump's cause. At stake in the analysis which follows are two knife edges upon which musical trolling teeters in the age of the (anti)social web: between humour and harm; between meaning and meaninglessness. Since the outrageous dubstep drops in MLG Montage Parodies dare us to laugh, it is important to question who we are being called to laugh with, who we are being called to laugh at, and what such laughter renders audible.

After introducing the origins of MLG Montage Parodies, I present an analysis of the dubstep drop's unsettled and unsettling role in this user-generated content. The closing remarks reflect on the strengths, limitations, and ethical implications of the research and issue a call for further research on music and online cultures.

### From kudos trolling to shitposting

Major League Gaming (MLG), established in 2002, is a leading eSports company that hosts professional video game tournaments in North America and elsewhere. In 2006, MLG became the first video gaming league to be televised in the United States. Unlike other companies, MLG is primarily known for competitions involving console-mediated first-person shooter (FPS) games rather than computer-mediated massively multiplayer online games (MMOG). MLG attracts outstanding FPS players who are assigned to registered franchise teams with salaried contracts. By the turn of 2010, MLG was gaining huge attention due to the commercial success of the FPS game *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare II*. Many gamers began to upload homemade montages of their *Call of Duty* gameplay to YouTube in the hope of being engaged by MLG. Most notably, a group of young male gamers calling themselves FaZe Clan began uploading virtuosic montages in 2010 and subsequently gained a professional MLG contract.<sup>29</sup> In the first of these videos, titled 'FaZe Clan Minitage',<sup>30</sup> edited *Call of Duty* gameplay is overdubbed with Tek-One's dubstep remix of 'Sleep with One Eye Open' by the metalcore band Bring Me The Horizon. This track foregrounds several

27 D'Errico, 'Electronic Dance Music in the Dubstep Era'; Limor Shifman, 'Memes in a Digital World: Reconciling with a Conceptual Troublemaker', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 18/3 (2013).

28 Mary Morgan, 'Travelling Facts', in *How Well Do Facts Travel? The Dissemination of Reliable Knowledge*, ed. Peter Howlett and Mary Morgan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 15.

29 For an analysis of the patriarchal dimensions of professional FPS gaming and the invisibility of female gamers, see Nicholas Taylor, Jen Jenson, and Suzanne de Castell, 'Cheerleaders/Booth Babes/Halo Hoes: Pro-Gaming, Gender and Jobs for the Boys', *Digital Creativity* 20/4 (2009).

30 FaZe Clan, 'FaZe Clan Minitage', *YouTube*, 2010, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z9ZlhMm5E20](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z9ZlhMm5E20).

indicative timbral topics, including a brooding piano introduction, torturous metal-style male vocals, and a tear-out bass drop. But significantly, these topics are interleaved with additional sonic elements from the auditory environment of the game itself, including sniper rifle sounds, cries of pain, and the exclamations of FaZe Clan members themselves (e.g., ‘Ohhh!!’ at 0:35).

Numerous copycat montages imitating the early FaZe Clan uploads followed that also foregrounded tear-out bass dubstep drops. Yet the auditory hype and overdone editing often belied relatively unremarkable gameplay: these ‘try hard’ montages seemed to be created by (pre)pubescent male wannabes, a strain of *Call of Duty* players and YouTube users who became known as skrubs. The distinctive form of user-generated content uploaded by FaZe Clan and copied by the skrubs was then parodied from 2011 onwards with the first instances of MLG Montage Parodies. These uploads trolled the pitiful attempts of the skrubs to gain attention; rather than being characterized by aspirational imitation, the early MLG Montage Parodies were defined by sardonic imitation. The subreddit *r/montageparodies* was created in 2012 with an explicit imperative to satirize gaming montages and their devotees. The montage parodies posted in the subreddit became increasingly complex, incorporating hysterical headset audio scraped from skrub videos, gameplay from non-FPS games synchronized with tear-out bass, animated GIFs, and shots of MLG-promoted products such as Doritos and Mountain Dew. The favoured editing software was Sony Vegas, which was used to create screen shakes, lens flare effects, and extreme zooms. One popular upload draws upon *Trainz Simulator 12* and the track ‘X Rated’ by Excision,<sup>31</sup> while another synchronizes *Farming Simulator* gameplay with ‘Bangarang’ by Skrillex.<sup>32</sup> Tracks such as these were vital to the early kudos trolling practices of the *r/montageparodies* community, as a review of its archives using the Wayback Machine reveals.<sup>33</sup> On 5 January 2013, an *r/montageparodies* member submitted a post that listed an established canon of suitable MLG Montage Parody music. In the related comments thread, there is a clear sense that aggressive tear-out bass tracks are more suitable for trolling skrubs than melodic dubstep.

However, over the course of 2013–2014, the original purpose of MLG Montage Parodies was seen to disintegrate as the content started to become reminiscent of attention-seeking shitposting. The aesthetic shift during this crucial period cannot be understood without acknowledging the expanding membership of *r/montageparodies*. During archival work, I found that the number of members increased from 8,135 to 18,917 over the period 21 May 2013 to 11 November 2013 and accelerated during 2014. In September 2014, *r/*

31 motdef, ‘TRAINZ SIMULATOR 12 [[MLG]] PRO NOSTEAM RAILSHOTZ (HD) (KING’S CROSS)’, *YouTube* (2011), [www.youtube.com/watch?v=rulEJJITVY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rulEJJITVY).

32 SsethTzeentach, ‘Farming Simulator Mad Skill | No Plow | 360 Crop Rotation |’, *YouTube*, 2012, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=gEJHrmlivQw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gEJHrmlivQw).

33 In total there are 108 screen-captures of *r/montageparodies* available via the Wayback Machine over the period 26 August 2012 to 15 November 2016. This method of archival work enables a view of the subreddit’s changing interface as well as access to threads that are otherwise invisible. Since this research was completed, the 4CAT toolkit developed by Stijn Peeters and Sal Hagen became an efficient way of collecting Reddit data via the Pushshift API. However, at the time of publication, the Pushshift API is no longer operational.



montageparodies reached 100,000 members and this figure rose to over 125,000 by the end of the year. The growing subreddit membership led to the rise of ‘uncreativity’<sup>34</sup> since new members sought acceptance and views by posting videos that stuck to a tried-and-tested formula. An important moment in the move towards uncreativity and formalization came with a post submitted on 5 January 2014. This presented a link to a zip file containing all the most popular MLG Montage Parody materials in a single package, including numerous sound clips as well as still images, animated GIFs, and video clips. The post received many upvotes, but some of the subreddit’s more established members expressed concern, since they were worried that others would start using the zip file materials only rather than drawing upon content of their own choosing that they had taken the time to collect themselves. In other words, the zip file split opinion and became seen as a reason for declining levels of creativity and originality. Although the pack of content was offered to the subreddit’s moderators for inclusion in the sidebar (which would have increased ease of access), they declined, fearing that the sounds and images would lose their meaning through overuse. The sidebar description was then updated on 10 January to include an imperative about the importance of creativity.

More broadly, analysing r/montageparodies data from the first half of 2014 reveals an awkward co-functioning between three different types of members with different priorities. First, there are the overenthusiastic newcomers with poor editing skills and little knowledge or appreciation of the subreddit’s original trolling function – they are remarkably similar to the skrubs trying to gain entry to MLG (henceforth neo-skrubs). Second, there are the pro memers, who came to the subreddit relatively late like the neo-skrubs but have high-level editing skills and work on their videos full-time, often gaining millions of views on monetized uploads. The pro memers increased the popularity of MLG Montage Parodies but also dragged the content further away from its original function of trolling gamer bros. Their virtuosic editing, use of overused memes, and prioritization of absurdist anti-humour were all contributing factors to both high view counts and this socioaesthetic shift. Finally, there are the long-term pessimists, who constantly bemoan the decline in quality and the move away from classic parodies. The discourse characteristic of this last group is especially prominent in a thread started on 18 June 2014. This debate centres on growing concerns that MLG Montage Parodies are becoming indistinguishable from an inferior type of user-generated content known as YouTube Poop.

By listening to the reverberations of r/montageparodies disputes, it becomes possible to gain greater knowledge of the different ways in which users might have encountered the dubstep drop in content from this period and laughed at it. The discourse relating to repetition versus originality, creativity versus uncreativity, and parody proper versus YouTube Poop makes audible the precarious and changing relationship between the social and the aesthetic. At one extreme, the drop can still be heard to choreograph sardonic laughter precisely because of its associations with MLG and skrub videos. From this first perspective, by laughing at the ludicrousness of the dubstep drop, one is laughing at FPS bro culture. But this homological

34 Born and Haworth, ‘From Microsound to Vaporwave’, 637, after Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

relationship has also started to become looser and post-ironic,<sup>35</sup> since the object of the trolling has become unclear. The dubstep drop may sound as though it is making a mockery of everyone and everything, thus giving rise to a distinctly absurd kind of laughter.<sup>36</sup> From this post-ironic perspective, one might hear the drop to be trolling and trivializing the androcentrism of FPS bro culture at one and the same time, or this ambivalence may even be lost altogether, with the result that one laughs *with* the dubstep drop and *with* its devotees in an affirmative manner. Emptied of its previous function, the dubstep drop begins to resonate with a greater degree of aesthetic autonomy as a sonic shitpost. The more one listens to it, the more it becomes a source of entertainment and sensory stimulation in its own right, and it enters the ears of the web user as a catchy end in itself. Critically, the dubstep drop's capacity to capture user attention as a sonic shitpost led to the timbral topic becoming an attractive source of bait in more extreme kinds of trolling strategies.

During the next phase of musical trolling, the dubstep drop was used as a hook to bait, reel in, and ridicule feminist web users. It became recast as 'ear rape', a memetic term that will be analysed with reference to musical misogyny in the next section.

### Musical misogyny during #GamerGate

Of all the case studies considered during the research, the perverse malleability of musical meaning online proved to be particularly sobering in the case of a drumstep<sup>37</sup> track titled 'We Don't Give a Fuck'.<sup>38</sup> This track begins with a syncopated synth loop oscillating between D and C# over an 85bpm half-step pattern. Semiquaver ride percussion and intermittent 'hey!' vocables arrive after five seconds, before a low to high EQ noise sweep paves the way for the entrance of a new synth lead hook at 0:22. Through its timbral incisiveness (with frequency content filed into a sharp blade of sound) and intervallic precarity (falling by a minor 9th, climbing a major 7th, and then teetering with a quasi-mordant), the synth-lead hook may seem to specify the adrenaline-addicted subjectivity described by Mike D'Errico in his account of brostep.<sup>39</sup> The unnerving sense of anticipation is compounded by the granular diminution topic at 0:33 (using a kick drum impulse), and then a pitched-down 'man-mountain' vocal sample interjects at 0:42 to deliver the pre-drop one-liner: 'We don't give a damn, we don't give a fuck.' The drop delivers a searing portamento figure (bending upwards from D) and rapidly automated tear-out bass riffage. This music is itself trolling the timbral and temporal conventions of canonical EDM, and it even rubbishes the 'radically

35 As Viveca S. Greene and colleagues note, 'present-day memes are often post-ironic, whereby post-irony refers to a style of humour where something is so extreme or absurd that it is unclear whether or not it is ironic'. Viveca S. Greene, Makena Rasmussen, and Dutch Clark, 'Memeology: Normalizing Hate Through Humour?', *The Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare* 4/2 (2021), 76.

36 Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, 'The Laughter of Being', *Modern Language Notes* 102/4 (1987), 748.

37 Drumstep is a derivative of dubstep that typically employs a faster tempo than the 140bpm default (also known as 70bpm 'half-step').

38 NightshiftClothing, 'Dirty Talk & Oscillator Z - We Don't Give a Fuck (Original Mix) FULL HD', *YouTUBE* (2012), [www.youtube.com/watch?v=cS0gl6hr89I](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cS0gl6hr89I).

39 D'Errico, 'Electronic Dance Music in the Dubstep Era'.

ungroovy groove-based music' discussed by Eric Clarke in relation to Tricky's version of trip-hop.<sup>40</sup> The jarring hiatus at 0:56 thwarts a sense of continuity or 'ground',<sup>41</sup> and at the second iteration of the portamento figure (1:07) the underlying beat drops out completely. But if the music itself can be heard to not give a damn, then who is the 'we' behind this deliberately rebarbative act of refusal?

Notwithstanding its seemingly androcentric affordances – as the sound of the male action hero on the edge, to recall D'Errico's phrase – 'We Don't Give a Fuck' was co-produced by Oscillator Z (Blaine Fowler of Corpus Christi, Texas) and Dirty Talk, a female duo from Minnesota (Monica Farr and Jordan 'Lucy Luxe' Osten). Upon discovering this nonconformity with the brostep narrative through reading the description attached to the YouTube upload, it becomes possible or even likely that the musical edginess and negation may come to sound like an intervention, provocation, or reclamation on the part of Dirty Talk and women participants within the transatlantic dubstep scene more broadly. One might even hear the drop as 'refreshing' having learned of Dirty Talk's co-production, to use a revealing word from the upload description. But if one were to possess memetic literacy and were to listen to a particular comment on the upload from 2014 – 'mlg feminism lol' – then this way of listening would quickly become muted or ruled out altogether. With a priori memetic literacy in hand, these three words become the chilling echo of the track's contribution to online misogyny in 2014. Significantly, 'We Don't Give a Fuck' was used in a particular MLG Montage Parody that year: *mlg feminism*, which was uploaded by the Russian pro memer NFKRZ on 27 November 2014.<sup>42</sup> It was from this period onwards that r/montageparodies started to form affinities with 'toxic technoculture',<sup>43</sup> partly due to the wider context of the #GamerGate phenomenon.

#GamerGate began when game designer Zoe Quinn was accused of having sex with a critic from the gaming website *Kotaku* in return for favourable game reviews. The Twitter hashtag #GamerGate was coined by the actor Adam Baldwin on 27 August 2014 and it soon gave rise to a significant online movement with the creation of the subreddit r/KotakuInAction as well as threads on 4chan. As Adrienne Massanari notes, #GamerGate quickly became toxic and anti-feminist, since those rallying behind the hashtag exploited the scandal 'to engage in concentrated harassment of game developers, feminist critics, and their male allies on Twitter and other platforms'.<sup>44</sup> In the #GamerGate flamewar that spread rapidly throughout the (anti)social web, prominent feminists such as Anita Sarkeesian often became caricatured as SJWs, while some of those opposed to them assumed the label of male rights activists (MRAs). #GamerGate also catalysed distinctive kinds of trolling behaviour that served to strengthen social relations among the movement's following and encouraged others

40 Eric Clarke, 'Rhythm/Body/Motion: Tricky's Contradictory Dance Music', in *Musical Rhythm in the Age of Digital Reproduction*, ed. Anne Danielsen (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 119.

41 Philip Tagg, 'From Refrain to Rave: The Decline of Figure and the Rise of Ground', *Popular Music* 13/2 (1994), 216.

42 NFKRZ, 'mlg feminism', *YouTube*, 2014, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=z\\_RLVodWQaw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z_RLVodWQaw).

43 Adrienne Massanari, '#GamerGate and the Fappening: How Reddit's Algorithm, Governance, and Culture Support Toxic Technocultures', *New Media & Society*, 19/3 (2017), 330.

44 Massanari, '#GamerGate and the Fappening', 334.

to become involved with it. NFKRZ's description for *mlg feminism* reads 'Please support fellow feminists by clicking this link', but the hyperlink itself directs the user to *r/montageparodies* – a classic deception strategy known as bait-and-switch trolling.

Critically, this upload description can also be heard to channel the (anti)social web's wider 'Logic of Lulz'.<sup>45</sup> The Logic of Lulz emerges online as an ironic and distancing discursive mode that often results in the whitewashing of racism and misogyny since posts are framed as 'only joking'. Noam Gal and colleagues also note that 'in many cases, memes tend to reflect the socio-demographic background of meme creators (typically white, privileged young men), commonly replicating well-entrenched hegemonic stereotypes'.<sup>46</sup> Although the internet may well 'enable different versions of ourselves to emerge dialogically',<sup>47</sup> thus allowing for hyperbolic kinds of performativity, it also increases the ease with which music can be sounded as a dog whistle, the perversity being that flocks of users are gathered together precisely through nebulous othering and memetic antagonism.<sup>48</sup>

With the above in mind, how might we listen to the musical materials in NFKRZ's upload itself,<sup>49</sup> which draws upon *Grand Theft Auto* gameplay, and perceive dilemmas regarding harmfulness versus harmlessness, meaningfulness versus meaninglessness, and seriousness versus tomfoolery? To what extent does musical misogyny emerge through carefully calculated timbral topics and sonic memes? SJWs are often cast as 'edgy' on the social web, and this motif arises in both *mlg feminism*'s user comments and in the video's opening music. Taken from 'Mr Balloon Hands' by J. Rabbit, this introductory C# minor theme foregrounds needling minor seconds and tritones through a saw-tooth synth-lead hook (Example 1). The graveness and prickliness of this hook serves the same function as the hyperlink bait described earlier. Through its intervallic edginess and despairing minor modality, the hook 'demands dialogue' and 'forces us to articulate a position in response'.<sup>50</sup> The YouTube user is also targeted by a succession of uppercase text bombshells, all of which are triggered kinediegetically by the track's forceful downbeats.<sup>51</sup> Then at the drop (0:12 onwards), the edgy and despairing motif is itself lacerated by tear-out bass assaults and glitches. These cutting interjections make a complete mockery of the theme's gravity through gestures that are aggressive and alarming

45 Noam Gal, Limor Shifman, and Zohar Kampf, "'It Gets Better": Internet Memes and the Construction of Collective Identity', *New Media & Society* 18/8 (2016).

46 Gal et al., 'Memes and the Construction of Collective Identity', 1701.

47 René Lysloff, 'Musical Community on the Internet: An On-Line Ethnography', *Cultural Anthropology* 18/2 (2003), 255.

48 Marc Tuters and Sal Hagen, '(((They))) Rule: Memetic Antagonism and Nebulous Othering on 4chan', *New Media & Society* 22/12 (2020). A dog whistle is a political concept that refers to phrases that may seem innocuous on an initial hearing to most people, but that deliver a clandestine appeal to those with extreme and problematic beliefs (such as anti-Semitic views).

49 NFKRZ, 'mlg feminism'.

50 David Clarke (after Mikhail Bakhtin), 'Eminem: Difficult Dialogics', in *Words and Music*, ed. John Williamson (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005), 80.

51 Mark Grimshaw and Gareth Schott, 'Situating Gaming as a Sonic Experience: The Acoustic Ecology of First-Person Shooters', *Papers from the Digital Games Research Association Conference, Tokyo, Japan* (2007), 476, [www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/07311.06195.pdf](http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/07311.06195.pdf).



**Example 1** Theme from ‘Mr Balloon Hands’ by J. Rabbit.

yet wholly ludicrous. At times the musical material is relatively coherent, with a high degree of harmonicity and identifiable pitches, especially during the iteration of the theme’s second half from 0:17–0:21. But there is also a great deal of loud and incoherent bluster (consider the two tear-out figures at 0:21 synced with the last two syllables of ‘NO TIME TO SHAVE THE ARMPITS’) and sonic detritus (consider the granular noise at 0:30–0:31 during the screen shake). Overall, the drop’s fluctuating harmonic-to-noise ratio (HNR) becomes a sonic simile for a series of problematics. Does the drop constitute playful and stultifying noisiness? Or does it deliver a misogynistic signal? Should we take offence? Or are we listening too closely to this sonic shitpost?

These dilemmas become even more pronounced from 0:39 onwards when the montage cuts to a confrontation between a woman and a young male anti-abortion activist on the streets of downtown Columbus, Ohio. The audio levels are significantly lower at first, but when the woman kicks over a sign with a picture of an aborted foetus on it, we experience an audiovisual assault (0:47). Shrieking headset audio from skrub uploads is combined with the searing portamento figure from the ‘We Don’t Give a Fuck’ drop, both of which are gain boosted to such an extent that they produce an ear-splitting shard of saturate noise, to use Denis Smalley’s terminology.<sup>52</sup> But to use the vernacular term, it must be stressed that this moment is a prime example of ‘ear rape’ as a trolling tactic and would be heard as such by many watching. Although the term is commonly used to describe sudden increases in volume and grating audio distortion in user-generated content online, it is important to consider the possibility of understanding ‘ear rape’ as the very sound of online misogyny. In the case of the ‘ear rape’ moment in *mlg feminism*, this is less of a critical interpretation and more like a possible way of listening that we are dared into entertaining. On the one hand, with NFKRZ’s own bait-and-switch hyperlinking in mind, it is possible to detect a kind of perceptual choreography at work, such that the web user is compelled to hear the ear rape drop as penetrative male audio aimed at the hysterical woman who kicks over the sign. Is NFKRZ also trolling Dirty Talk by reclaiming their feminist claim on brostep through his choice of track? There is no way of knowing.<sup>53</sup> Crucially, the moment is simultaneously framed as meaningless noise and as a mere joke due to the normalization of ear rape online as a sonic shitpost. In the guise of YouTube poop, the ear rape drop tries to seduce web users into becoming complicit with musical misogyny. To put it another way, it is through the very act of posing as a senseless sonic shitpost that the ear rape drop is able to whitewash misogyny at the same time as it amplifies it. The dubstep drop’s capacity to deliver this powerful kind of harmful

52 Denis Smalley, ‘Spectromorphology: Explaining Sound-Shapes’, *Organised Sound* 2/2 (1997), 120.

53 As Claire Hardaker stresses in work on internet trolling, ‘we do not “know” or “retrieve” interpretations or intentions’. Very often there remains ‘a grey area’, which is ‘precisely the opening that allows trolling to exist’. Claire Hardaker, ‘Trolling in Asynchronous Computer-Mediated Communication: From User Discussions to Academic Definitions’, *Journal of Politeness Research* 6/2 (2010), 204.

harmlessness also made it an important source of ammunition during the US presidential race of 2015–2016, a period known as the ‘Great Meme War’.

### The weaponization of the dubstep drop in the ‘Great Meme War’

To return to the opening tableau and questions with which this article began: what led to Donald Trump retweeting an MLG Montage Parody in which he drops the bass on a political rival? And why did the video creator choose to use the dubstep track ‘Centipede’ by Knife Party? Although the previous sections go some way to providing a broader background for this sensational moment, it is now necessary to consider the upload’s more immediate provenance and impact. With the release and circulation of ‘Can’t Stump the Trump (Volume 4)’ in October 2015, the memes and audiovisual aesthetics previously confined to *r/montageparodies* were hijacked and weaponized as right-wing political propaganda, and having been promoted by Donald Trump’s retweet the dubstep ‘mic drop’ formula was now a winner. A sketch of the musical clickbait from ‘Centipede’ is provided in [Example 2](#), and the use of the track soon gave rise to pro-Trump Twitter hashtags such as #Centipede and #NimbleNavigator as well as the account @MAGapede. Artwork depicting Trump as a centipede and even pictures of pro-Trump centipede clothing began to circulate on Twitter too. Yet the most revealing data of all concerning the anthemic status of ‘Centipede’ could be found in the pro-Trump subreddit *r/The\_Donald*. Strikingly, members of *r/The\_Donald* were listed as ‘centipedes’ in the sidebar during the rest of the ‘Great Meme War’, a finding which suggests that this self-referential subreddit community was musically as well as politically imagined ([Figure 1](#)).

On 14 February 2016, the creator of the ‘Can’t Stump the Trump’ series joined *r/The\_Donald* in order to interact with fellow Trump fans. In the resulting thread, he was asked why he chose ‘Centipede’ as the principal musical theme and why it works so well. In reply, he explained that someone commented about anticipating an MLG Montage Parody style of video after they saw the title of Volume 1 in the series. This intrigued him, so he decided to use Google to search for ‘MLG dubstep tracks’. The results directed him to a list someone had made, most probably the *r/montageparodies* music thread discussed earlier. The ‘Can’t Stump the Trump’ creator recognized Knife Party from their track ‘Bonfire’, so he decided to listen to ‘Centipede’ to see what it was like. It was the first one he tried, and it worked so well with visual footage of Trump that he did not feel the need to consider any other alternatives. Reflecting on this moment of discovery, he muses that ‘Centipede’ may well have been destined to be unofficial campaign music for Trump. Other subreddit members then quip in the replies thread, with one requesting that ‘Centipede’ be played when Trump wins a specific state, while another posts a link to an eight-string electric guitar cover of the track<sup>54</sup> and calls for this version to be performed at Trump’s inauguration. There are also several instances of lyric sharing, whereby the centipedes quote one line each of the track’s opening narration in a group performance. Yet the most prominent theme to emerge from the thread analysis was

54 Fracionado, ‘Knife Party – Centipede (Guitar Cover)’, *YouTube*, 2012, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZSrfwBSZJyU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZSrfwBSZJyU). On the date I first accessed this video (27 January 2017) I found that the Top Comments selection had been territorialized by Trump supporters.





**Figure 1** ‘Centipede’-related content in pro-Trump social web spaces.

words such as ‘sick’ (as an affirmative term) can therefore cause problems. Overall, although the pilot crawl was revealing, the corpus it returned was found to contain some spam from the period 2008–2010 before the genesis of MLG Montage Parodies. Therefore, an Advanced Boolean crawl was subsequently run using the search string ‘MLG Montage Parody’; ‘MLG Montage Parodies’; ‘[MLG]’; ‘major league gaming montage parodies’; ‘Major League Gaming Montage Parodies’. This resulted in a corpus of 192,789 comments by 192,560 users on 657 videos, with a starting date of January 2013. Mozdeh estimated that 16.8% of the commenters were male ( $n = 32,323$ ), 5.2% female ( $n = 10,114$ ), and 78.0% unknown ( $n = 150,352$ ). The result for this smaller, cleaner set of data was similar: ‘donald trump’ returned far more matches than ‘hillary clinton’. Yet word association tests were even more revealing. The five most common words associated with ‘donald trump’ were ‘president’ (10.2%), ‘hate’ (4.4%), ‘wall’ (4.2%), ‘won’ (3.7%), and ‘america’ (3.5%). The five most common words associated with ‘hillary clinton’ were ‘trump’ (18.3%), ‘donald’ (7.3%), ‘bernie’ (6.1%), ‘president’ (6.1%), and ‘america’ (6.1%).

Webometric analysis is primarily concerned with relationality and attention capital, and it is revealing that Clinton was commonly mentioned in relation to Trump and that Trump was not as reciprocally associated with his rival. A clear winner emerges, namely the candidate who corresponds to the dominant commenter gender. Equally revealing – from a qualitative perspective – is the fact that Clinton is gunned down by the ‘Centipede’ drop in an upload titled *MLG Hillary Clinton* and cast as the ‘FIRST PROSTITUTE PRESIDENT’ by flashing text.<sup>57</sup> Overall, it seems clear that Clinton suffered during the ‘Great Meme War’ of 2015–2016 because she was seen as bad in a bad way – as cringeworthy and untrustworthy.

57 Flater, ‘MLG Hillary Clinton’, *YouTube*, 2016, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=mh1hvAjYjvU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mh1hvAjYjvU). More broadly, Clinton was widely ridiculed after uttering the awkward pun ‘Pokémon GO to the polls’ at a campaign event in northern Virginia on 14 July 2016. This attempt to appeal to young gamers through a reference to a popular video game was regarded as an unsuccessful ‘forced meme’. Additionally, it should be noted that footage of Clinton’s 2005



Though a reductive and approximate measure, the SentiStrength result for ‘hillary clinton’ from the pilot data could be said to support this conclusion. Crucially, Trump was also seen as bad (consider the split SentiStrength result), but he was deliberately and deliciously disgusting. Trump’s audiovisual persona commanded a very specific kind of edginess – the aesthetics of the grotesque.<sup>58</sup> The grotesque bypasses the dichotomy between positive and negative valence. As David Clarke muses, ‘is there a verb meaning to be simultaneously repelled and attracted?’<sup>59</sup> Trump’s grotesque, deliberately low demeanour is encapsulated by an important slang term encountered during the research: ‘based’. The word appeared repeatedly in YouTube comment sections and subreddit threads, sometimes stylized with bold text. In the video ‘MLG Trump Reks Everyone’, which one user describes as a cheap imitation of the ‘You Can’t Stump the Trump’ series, we see the red text ‘ABSOLUTELY BASED’ appear at 3:26 upon Trump’s mic drop.<sup>60</sup> Trump’s victim is absolutely based by the musical assault, but Trump is also absolutely based himself – he is despicable in a devil-may-care manner. Revealingly, ‘based’ was first used by the rapper Lil B but soon gained currency online. It is a reclaimed, dialogic word, as Lil B explains: ‘People used to make fun of me. They was like, “You’re based”. They’d use it as a negative. And what I did was turn that negative into a positive. I started embracing it like, “Yeah, I’m based”. I made it mine’.<sup>61</sup>

Both Donald Trump and the dubstep drop are based – deliberately based – and they take ownership of their baseness in a thoroughly grotesque and compelling manner. As such, the alliance between Donald Trump and the dubstep drop during 2015–2016 constituted a powerful double negative that was insidious and irresistible. Through ‘a particular process of affective translation’, the drop provided a punchline that made his crude behaviour ‘not a cause for disgust or recoil’ but rather ‘an object of scoffing attraction, if not attachment’.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, for Trump supporters the mic drop formula provided an endless source of ammunition with which to troll weak male ‘cucks’ such as Jeb Bush and female SJWs such as Hillary Clinton. But this online warfare also produced collateral damage. The videos from this period were so absolutely based that they dragged r/montageparodies down to a new low. On 11

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‘war’ on violent video games was widely shared among male FPS players during the ‘Great Meme War’ and might be regarded as another factor that contributed to Trump’s eventual victory.

58 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984); Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Poetics and Politics of Transgression* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986); Esti Sheinberg, *Irony, Satire, Parody, and the Grotesque in the Music of Shostakovich: A Theory of Musical Incongruities* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000).

59 Clarke (after Mikhail Bakhtin), ‘Difficult Dialogics’, 75.

60 Pencilstixandjunk, ‘MLG TRUMP REKS EVERYONE’, *YouTube*, 2015, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=GuV4ZfsqMpM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GuV4ZfsqMpM).

61 Complex, ‘Lil B Talks Getting Sucker Punched, Gay Rumors, & Drake Envy’, *Complex*, 2010, [www.complex.com/music/2010/06/lil-b-talks-getting-sucker-punched-gay-rumors-drake-envy](http://www.complex.com/music/2010/06/lil-b-talks-getting-sucker-punched-gay-rumors-drake-envy). For a study of how the memetic term ‘based’ evolved between 2010 and 2021 on Twitter, Reddit, and 4Chan, see Sal Hagen and Daniël de Zeeuw, ‘Based and Confused: Tracing the Political Connotations of a Memetic Phrase across the Web’, *Big Data & Society* 10/1 (2023).

62 Serguei Oushakine, ‘Introduction: Jokes of Repression’, *Eastern European Politics & Societies* 25/4 (2011), 655, quoted in Tanja Petrović, ‘Political Parody and the Politics of Ambivalence’, *Annual Review of Anthropology* 47 (2018).

November 2016, a few days after the US election result, the subreddit's founder authored a post about dropping previous restrictions which ensured that r/montageparodies was primarily associated with MLG Montage Parodies. This was a desperate attempt to reconfigure the reputation of the subreddit, since they now realized that MLG Montage Parody memes may well have contributed to Donald Trump being elected. The prevalence of this idea, in both r/The\_Donald and r/montageparodies, suggests that arguments about the seductive power of signs in the age of mass consumption cannot be dismissed entirely. Some social web users really were seduced by based user-generated content during the 'Great Meme War', as shown by numerous testimonials. In the era of 'post-truth', the 'Centipede' phenomenon suggests that 'the distinction between reality and its direct and true representation does not apply'.<sup>63</sup>

### Closing remarks: a call for memetic musical literacy

As this article has demonstrated, the dubstep drop is a meme that necessitates a new kind of musical literacy, theoretical recalibration, and an updated methodological framework. But what are the wider implications of conceptualizing the dubstep drop as a meme in this way? In one sense, the original conception of memes as contagious cultural bacteria<sup>64</sup> proved to be far more pervasive online than I had anticipated. Yet what may seem like memetic contagion is really a process that involves various kinds of imitation, and so the neo-Darwinian conception of memes inaugurated by Richard Dawkins cannot be allowed to pose as a theoretical master conceit.<sup>65</sup> Instead, a 'mentalist-driven' conception of the drop as a meme (whereby it possesses its own agency) must be balanced with a 'behaviour-driven' account whereby we investigate the contribution of human agency in the creation and diffusion of weaponized timbral topics online.<sup>66</sup> As a meme, then, the dubstep drop has 'no existence outside the events, practices, and texts in which it appears; that is, it is always experienced as encoded information'.<sup>67</sup> To put it another way, music is now not only a form of affective scaffolding<sup>68</sup> but also a vehicle that is loaded with contradictory affordances and passes through divergent mediation pathways. The dubstep drop's musical affordances are not ambiguous or opaque (implicit, vague, obfuscated) but rather ambivalent: its specification of rupture catalyses dis/unity (galvanizing certain web users at the very moment it demonizes others). Despite this, the drop does not merely *carry* these affordances as a meme vehicle – it is also *routed* (and rerouted) through the web's labyrinthine thoroughfares, whereupon its affordances mutate and are reconfigured. Diverted along the #GamerGate mediation pathway, for instance, the dubstep drop began to augment the androcentrism-cum-toxic-masculinity that

63 Petrović, 'Political Parody and the Politics of Ambivalence', 202.

64 Richard Dawkins, 'Memes: The New Replicators', in *The Selfish Gene: 40th Anniversary Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Daniel Dennett, 'Memes and the Exploitation of the Imagination', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 48/2 (1990).

65 Spencer, 'From Contagion to Imitation', 53.

66 Shifman, 'Memes in a Digital World', 366.

67 Shifman, 'Memes in a Digital World', 367.

68 Joel Krueger, 'Music as Affective Scaffolding', in *Music and Consciousness 2: Worlds, Practices, Modalities*, ed. Ruth Herbert, David Clarke, and Eric Clarke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

it had initially ridiculed. Then, hijacked by pro-Trump web users and led down an alt-right mediation pathway, dubstep mutated into a new genre altogether – ‘cuckstep’ – a grotesque derivative used to gun down weak centrist ‘cucks’.<sup>69</sup>

Albeit in a sobering manner, dubstep’s capacity to entrain web users to the beat of populist politics reveals that music (still) matters in the age of the (anti)social web. Yet this case study has also demonstrated that ‘the internet changes what a music genre *is* in the twenty-first century’, since it ‘multiplies music’s discursive and social mediation, engendering new online entities, practices, and relations’.<sup>70</sup> At a time when university music departments are facing funding cuts in the UK, Australia, and elsewhere (often due to the right-wing populism of government policy), ontological recalibration is needed in order to fuel renewal within music studies. Provocatively, then: is the very notion of *music* today as ontologically robust as it was previously assumed to be before the advent of the World Wide Web? What, exactly, *is* this thing called music that we are to distinguish from sociality, trolling practices, and centipede politicians? Both memetic musical literacy and digital methods skills are now required to embark on a vital scholarly project through which the very fate of music studies may well be decided. Put directly, we must all endeavour to listen critically to the sounds of the (anti)social web – we must aim to become as conversant and familiar with these (often grotesque) sounds as Barry Cooper became with Beethoven’s idiom, or Stephen Feld became with the sounds of the Bosavi rainforest and Kaluli song.<sup>71</sup> There are also ethical implications to consider in relation to this endeavour. If musicology is to come into greater alignment with the pursuit of social justice,<sup>72</sup> memetic musical literacy is needed in order to acquire greater knowledge of the ways in which music is weaponized online. The counterargument, and a possible limitation of the research at hand, is that such work would only serve to amplify musical trolling and its relationships with rebarbative hate speech, toxic masculinity, and political extremism without offering practical solutions or policy guidance. From this perspective, such research could be viewed as feeding the trolls to the extent that scholarly silence on the matter might be perceived as a more appropriate course of (non)action. In reply to such a critique, it should be stressed that there is an urgent need to redefine the role of the musicologist in the age of the (anti)social web. Considering the involvement of musicologists in legal proceedings relating to sampling and copyright in recent decades, there is no reason why musicologists should not enter into dialogue with internet scholars who are already involved in holding users, social media platforms, and governmental web policies to account.

Conflicting ethical principles proved to be the most difficult issue when preparing this article for publication, and full disclosure is offered here with a view to reducing disparities and

69 Although ‘cuckstep’ names (and musicalizes) a *nebulous* out-group, the term originally came into being through the trolling of an *individual* who attended an anti-Trump demonstration. This young man became known as ‘AIDS Skrillex’ due to their similar appearance to Skrillex the dubstep producer.

70 Born and Haworth, ‘From Microsound to Vaporwave’, 602–3, my emphasis.

71 Barry Cooper, *Beethoven* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Steven Feld, ‘Waterfalls of Song: An Acoustemology of Place Resounding in Bosavi, Papua New Guinea’, in *Senses of Place*, ed. Steven Feld and Keith Basso (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 1996).

72 William Cheng, *Loving Music till It Hurts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

further problems for those pursuing future research. Initially, the research at hand followed the ethical rationale of Emma Jane by taking the deliberate decision ‘not only to cite a multitude of examples [of online misogyny and other online discourse], but to cite a number of unexpurgated examples’. From this perspective, it is argued that ‘to fully grasp the nature and extent of the problem, we must bring it into the daylight and look at it directly, no matter how unsettling or unpleasant the experience might be’.<sup>73</sup> I was initially aligned with this ethical orientation due to its boldness and interventionist aims. However, Jane’s direct quotation of r/KotakuInAction posts can be used to quickly find the original bile in the subreddit, and she was subsequently targeted by the #GamerGate followers she was researching. Notwithstanding the understandable ideals of an interventionist ethical approach, it is nonetheless important to protect oneself as a researcher. Since Jane’s book was published and since the research at hand was completed, the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) published Version 3 of their ethical guidelines. This framework emphasizes ‘the growing need for *protecting the researchers*, as well as our subjects and informants’, since ‘phenomena such as “GamerGate” and similar events highlight comparatively new risks and levels of risk’.<sup>74</sup> The article therefore follows AoIR recommendations by paraphrasing or rephrasing all posts wherever possible in order to avoid direct quotation that could be pasted into a search engine.<sup>75</sup>

Though it is important to look outwards (and towards greater understanding of musical misogyny online through scholarly and professional collaboration), it will also be necessary to develop ethical and health-related reflexivity by looking inward and considering our own subjectivity as researchers. To put it bluntly: at times during this multiyear research project, I found myself feeling extremely uncomfortable, as did close colleagues upon reading drafts of this work. At other times, however, I would lose all track of time having fallen down the MLG Montage Parody rabbit hole and was on the verge of being seduced by the musical trolling despite myself.

Just as the Logic of Lulz operates through the dangerous formula of ‘only joking’, the affective power of music can animate a dark kind of empathy through which we find ourselves partially aligning with online actors and sentiments we would ordinarily distance ourselves from. Relishing the sheer outrageousness and ridiculousness of musical assaults on easily lambasted victims, we might deny that this internet-mediated music has any hold on us, or any political significance, or any meaningful consequences. Yet we have just become complicit through the seemingly passive act of listening. Since its ontological status is so distorted in the age of the (anti)social web, music is now rarely ‘only music’. We are usually listening to

73 Jane, *Misogyny Online*, 14, original emphasis.

74 aline shakti franzke, Anja Bechmann, Michael Zimmer, and Charles M. Ess, ‘Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0’, *Association of Internet Researchers* 2020, 11, <https://aoir.org/reports/ethics3.pdf>, original emphasis.

75 Close colleagues also discuss ethical considerations. See Steven Gamble, ‘Towards an Ethical Model of Social Media Data Analysis for Internet Music Studies’, in *Music and the Internet: Methodological, Epistemological, and Ethical Orientations*, ed. Christopher Haworth, Edward Katrak Spencer, and Daniele Shlomit Sofer (New York: Routledge, forthcoming); Sam de Boise, ‘Challenges, Opportunities and Ethics in the Study of Music Amongst the Far-Right Online’, in *Music and the Internet: Methodological, Epistemological, and Ethical Orientations*.

listening as well as the music at hand given the abundance and prominence of musical opinion data online – vocal reactions and reactionist performances that influence our own responses as perceptual ordering devices.<sup>76</sup> When we listen to the laughter of centipedes who are listening to a debased musical assault, we might laugh ourselves, at least at first. But through listening critically to the musical baseness, the laughter of the centipedes, and our own laughter, we may realize that we are actually laughing at ourselves for being part of the insectine world and post-truth era that such music-engendered laughter specifies and embodies. The joke is on us.<sup>77</sup> Despite the various challenges that lie ahead, research on music and memetic online cultures holds the potential to elucidate what it is like to be a netizen of the twenty-first century and to render audible the very mechanisms of the (anti)-social web.

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