The role of mashup music in creating Web 2.0’s democratic promise

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Abstract
This article employs Stuart Hall’s concept of ‘articulation’ to show how, in the mid-2000s, a loose coalition of tech activists and commentators worked to position mashup music as ‘the sound of the Internet’. Key aesthetic characteristics of mashups were utilized to present Web 2.0 as a specific kind of democratic, participatory media environment – one that had the power to dethrone old social institutions, and to render various kinds of borders and boundaries redundant. This short-lived articulation between mashup and the Internet has had significant benefits for contemporary platforms that have made their fortune on user participation; it has been less beneficial for the longevity of mashup as a genre. Thus, this article inverts the standard presentation of mashup music and network technologies. Generally presented as a musical culture that needed the Internet, mashup can be more fruitfully understood as a music culture that the Internet needed. This reformulation provides cause to question our contemporary relationship to ‘digital optimism’ more generally.

Keywords
Articulation, cultural texts, democratization, digital optimism, Internet history, mashup, music sampling, remix, Web 2.0

The history of the Internet’s first half-century is to a large degree a history of optimism towards its potential for realizing drastic social change. While the strength and shape of this optimism has varied across the decades (Streeter, 2011), it found an especially intoxicating formulation in ‘Web 2.0’, which focussed on the imminent mainstreaming, and thus the full beneficial realization, of the Internet’s circulatory capacities. It was claimed that these circulatory capacities would bring about substantial democratization – and a democratization of culture, in particular (Rosen, 2006). Web
2.0 was seen as allowing for (or even assuring) several significant upheavals in the realm of culture, including a much-reduced division between producers and audiences via the obsoletion of intermediaries and gatekeepers; greater (and less economically determined) access to cultural goods; a larger proportion of cultural goods coming under public (rather than corporate) ownership and control, and a beneficial blurring of distinctions between the production and consumption of culture (Bruns, 2010; Sinnreich, 2010; Valtysson, 2010).

In the fifteen or so years since peak participatory rhetoric (and even at the time), scholars have critically attended to these optimistic claims (Barney et al., 2016; Deuze, 2009; Scholz, 2008; Van Dijck and Nieborg, 2009; Turner, 2010). But there has been much less work revisiting the specific cultural texts that were most closely associated with those claims. This article suggests that it wasn’t just the circulatory potential of the Internet that mattered – the kinds of cultural texts that were circulated mattered, too. During the early and mid-2000s, certain kind of texts – not just the Internet’s circulatory power in the abstract – were provided as evidence for the successful present and future functioning of the Internet. Indeed, some forms of cultural text seemed to embody, and become redolent of, this participatory zeitgeist. The subject of this article is one of those forms: mashup music.

Mashup music is a musical form in which a new recording is made by combining samples of existing, usually well-known popular music recordings, most frequently by layering the vocal tracks from one recording ‘above’ the instrumental tracks of another. It was one of the first forms of music to become strongly articulated to the Internet and, as such, was frequently presented as a harbinger of broader participatory culture to come, in a flurry of academic work as well as in online and print journalistic accounts (McLeod, 2005; Sinnreich, 2010). In 2009, The Guardian’s Dorian Lynskey named a mashup by producer Freelance Hellraiser as ‘the song that defines the [past] decade’, in an article which presented the song as an ‘accidental prophecy’ for the digitalization of music that followed (2009). In the 2010s, mashups lost some of their cultural pertinence (Fairchild, 2017; Winkie, 2018). But mashups tend to feature even now in short lists of ‘digital culture’; for example, the blurb of Vincent Miller’s Understanding Digital Culture (2020) refers to mashups along with microblogging, online gaming and cybersex.

To the extent that mashups’ distinct aesthetic has been put into relation with technological progress, it has been considered as enabled by (or as a response to) new capacities for production, circulation and consumption (e.g. Shuker, 2017: 213–214). Here, for instance, is how music critic Sasha Frere-Jones introduced mashups to the readership of The New Yorker (2005):

Mashups find new uses for current digital technology, a new iteration of the cause-and-effect relationship behind almost every change in pop-music aesthetics: the gear changes, and then the music does. If there is an electric guitar of mashup, it is a software package called Acid Pro, which enables one to put loops of different songs both in time and in tune with each other. [Mashup producer] Mark Vidler, known professionally as Go Home Productions, explained some other benefits of digital technology [. . .]: ‘You don’t need a distributor, because your distribution is the Internet. You don’t need a record label, because it’s your bedroom, and you don’t need a recording studio, because that’s your computer. You do it all yourself.’

This article seeks to invert that conventional, technologist framing. Rather than showing how mashups utilized the Internet, I suggest that the more lasting legacy is how the Internet utilized mashups. Mashup music’s cultural zenith came right at the dawn of Web 2.0, in 2004 – in the midst of ‘participatory culture’, but before the founding of some of the major platforms that would be associated with this discourse (e.g. YouTube in 2006, SoundCloud in 2007). It was assigned a
prototypical status as one of the first flourishings of demotic creativity unleashed by radically new technological pathways. This assignation was neither inevitable nor accidental. I employ the concept of articulation to show how a loose coalition of Silicon Valley advocates and commentators effectively adopted mashup music. The aesthetic characteristics of mashups were, in a sense, put to work to present the emerging Web 2.0 as a specific kind of democratic, participatory media environment.

In most academic work, the particularly digital significance of mashups resides in their legal and economic challenge to the cultural industries; Miller summarizes that ‘the genre by nature confounds notions of intellectual property and authorship’ (2020: 91). This is certainly a key reason for mashup’s central role in framing and impacting debate regarding the relative virtues of ‘old’ media (most obviously the music recording and publishing industries) and the ‘new’. But I suggest that these aspects are not a fully sufficient explanation for mashup music’s articulation to Internet-enabled democratic promise. Mashups’ textual features – their modularity, their transparency, their playfulness and their genre-crossing aspects – were in themselves seen as representative of new media potentialities. First, I outline the relationship between these textual features and Web 2.0 culture and then move to show how the developing political economy of platforms led to the current voided status of this articulation today. Lastly, in a short coda section, I consider how my analysis might help reconfigure our contemporary relationship to Web 2.0-era ‘digital optimism’.

Mashups, ‘cyber-activism’ and Silicon Valley: Evidencing articulation

The primary event that linked mashups to an emergent ‘participatory’ Internet culture was Grey Tuesday. This online ‘day of action’, on Tuesday 24th February 2004, consisted of a coordinated mass trespass of intellectual property, wherein over 170 websites, mostly small personal blogs, hosted MP3 files of The Grey Album – a mashup album made using vocal acapellas from Jay-Z’s The Black Album, and an array of samples from The Beatles’ 1968 self-titled album (known as The White Album). This protest was a deliberate show of defiance to EMI, the owner of The Beatles’ recording rights, enacted after lawyers representing Capitol (then an EMI subsidiary) sent ‘cease-and-desist’ letters to several previous uploaders of the album demanding that the mashed-up Beatles recordings be taken offline.

The Grey Tuesday protest was not organized by the mashup’s producer, DJ Danger Mouse, who in fact distanced himself from the action (Rimmer, 2007: 133). It was organized by Downhill Battle, an anti-music industry lobbying group formed 6 months previously, in August 2003, by a handful of young men and women based in Worcester, Massachusetts. On their website – now largely filled with broken links, but thankfully preserved by the Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine – their strident rhetoric suggests a fierce belief in their cause and an assuredness regarding their place in history. ‘When the major labels crumble’, they wrote, ‘the diversity of mainstream music will blossom. It will be a revolution in pop culture. People will decide what’s popular, not marketing’ (Downhill Battle, n.d.). In building such rhetoric into their Grey Tuesday protest, activists at Downhill Battle positioned mashups at the frontline of an Internet-enabled revolution of musical production, distribution and consumption.

However, while Grey Tuesday was presented as an anti-recording industry protest – ‘it’s time for music fans to stand up and demand change from the music industry’s copyright cartel’ (Grey Tuesday, 2004) – its most significant actors are best understood in relation to Internet culture and tech policy, rather than music culture as such. Downhill Battle’s social and intellectual milieu
seems to have centred around the tech-based ‘free culture’ movement of the period (a term popularized by prominent legal scholar Lawrence Lessig); key group members spent time socializing with late programmer and technology activist Aaron Swartz and participated alongside him the Free Culture conference hosted by American University in May 2005 (Swartz, 2005). At least three of Downhill Battle’s key coordinators have subsequently built careers in ‘digital rights’ advocacy, working with groups such as Fight for the Future on campaigns in defence of net neutrality, and against state surveillance of online activity. Today, two founder members of Downhill Battle also have Silicon Valley connections beyond just policy and advocacy: one is listed as founder of The Ocean (‘a high-performance de-centralized blockchain exchange’) and dating start-up XO (‘the dating app with icebreaker games’), another is the co-founder of CottageClass, an online ‘microschool’ that aims to reinvent education as ‘Airbnb and Uber have reinvented the travel and private car industry’. Downhill Battle itself quickly developed into the Participatory Culture Foundation, notable for its strong links with Mitch Kapor, a key Silicon Valley figure who stands today, with his wife Freada Kapor Klein, at the centre of a particular nexus of social entrepreneurship, digital liberalism and venture capital. A further link between Grey Tuesday and Internet culture was its endorsement by the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), the pioneering cyber-lobbying group founded in 1990 by Kapor along with John Gilmore and John Perry Barlow.

The connective activity between mashups and Internet culture also extended beyond the Grey Tuesday protest. One early mashup compilation album (*Best of Bootie*, 2006) was given substantial exposure via a post on *BoingBoing* – the most popular blog in the world in that period (Technorati, 2005). Co-editor of *BoingBoing*, Cory Doctorow, held sufficient standing for media scholar Adam Arvidsson to describe him in 2010, using Gramscian terminology, as a ‘sort of “organic intellectual” to the Silicon Valley based tech-entrepreneurial movement’ (Arvidsson, 2010: 1). And by 2007, mashup seems to have become a kind of approved soundtrack to an elite social scene in San Fransisco (home of Silicon Valley). DJ Earworm, creator of a renowned series of annual mashups called ‘United State of Pop’, recalls of that period:

> I did this gig at the Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco, and [famed event-planner Stanlee Gatti] was in charge of it. And he was like, ‘oh, this is fresh, I wanna use you for everything!’ I just started doing all of the elite of San Francisco, all the billionaires and, like, the Gettys, you know, Larry Page from Google, the Fishers from Gap, the Pritzkers, the Schwabs, it was just anyone who was anyone, just all of a sudden for that year I was like playing at their crazy events. (DJ Earworm, interview)²

For all that Nevada-based Burning Man gatherings became a ‘cultural infrastructure’ for Bay Area new media in the 1990s and 2000s, becoming a ‘physical analog of the Internet’ (Turner, 2009), my assertion is that mashup music that served a comparable albeit less spectacular purpose in that particular, post-dot-com crash, pre-Facebook moment of the ‘blogosphere’.

This connection between Internet culture and mashup music can be fruitfully considered in terms of *articulation*. This concept, developed by influential cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall, is often used to acknowledge the complexity of the relationship between culture and the economy, and thus to reject the notion (associated with some Marxian approaches) that the economic ‘base’ could ever be fully determinant of cultural activity. Operating at a slightly different level, it can also be used to consider the character of links between social formations and cultural texts, to show that textual characteristics are unlikely to be homological (i.e. culture never manifests as a one-to-one reflection of society). Hall outlines articulation as
a connection or link which is not necessarily given in all cases, as a law or a fact of life, but which requires particular conditions of existence to appear at all, which has to be positively sustained by specific processes, which is not ‘eternal’ but has to be constantly renewed, which can under some circumstances disappear or be overthrown, leading to the old linkages being dissolved and new connections – re-articulations – being forged. It is also important that an articulation between different practices does not mean that they become identical or that one is dissolved into the other. (Hall, 1985: 113–114, footnote 2)

Importantly, there are limits to articulation in terms of what kinds of linkages can be made – it does not reduce down to ‘anything is possible’. This makes it quite different from a reading of culture as infinitely malleable, and thus as something that ‘escapes’ materiality to become a free play of discourses (see Slack, 1996). It also necessitates consideration of power since, as Clarke notes, assessing articulation involves ‘paying attention to both the conditions of their existence and the political-cultural work [...] that went into making and sustaining specific articulations’ (2015: 277).

In supporting the case for articulation – rather than seeing mashup as a determined outcome of technological possibilities – it is important to make clear that what is specific to this historical conjuncture is the attachment of discrete entities, rather than their simultaneous emergence. It is relevant, then, that Downhill Battle was not initially a group that had anything to do with mashups or remixes. Their first significant project was the launch of a legal defence fund for individuals that were then being sued by the RIAA for downloading music using peer-to-peer file-sharing software – that is, not a defence of new artistic creation but of consumers’ rights to access music without paying. They also had a clear affinity with punk rock music, as the genre which presumably spoke most obviously to a notion of anti-music industry resistance. Pre-Grey Tuesday, the Downhill Battle website included an interview with DIY punk totem Ian MacKaye (Reville, 2004) and a reposting of producer Steve Albini’s famous anti-major label essay ‘The Problem with Music’.

Mashup-esque music had been around for a long time, too, under a variety of names – sometimes with politically resistant connotations of ‘culture jamming’ (e.g. Negativland), sometimes as high art engagement with pop culture (John Oswald’s Plunderphonics) and sometimes as a corollary to the more pragmatic omnivorousness of DJ culture. The circulatory capacity of the Internet had a substantial impact, especially in terms of access to sample-able material (Shiga, 2007), but it is also important to note that mashups’ circulation via the ‘old-fashioned’ medium of CDs (especially recordable CD-Rs) was central to its success in the early 2000s (McGranahan, 2010). Mashups also found some success by operating within existing, mostly offline music formations. Freelance Hellraiser’s famous ‘A Stroke of Genie-us’ mashup, from 2001, benefitted from airplay on London radio station XFM, and from plays at trend-setting club nights in the United Kingdom. Several of the most prominent mashup producers – including Danger Mouse, Freelance Hellraiser and Girl Talk – made the move to ‘legitimate’ music production (or, in some cases, were already working in both fields). Mashup producers were always-already integrated with the music industries, rather than entirely antagonistic towards it, especially if we see the music industries as broader than just its recording and publishing arms (Williamson and Cloonan, 2007). They were not (or at least, not inevitably) the emergent techno-dilettantes that online and then mainstream media coverage tended to present them as.

DJ Danger Mouse’s The Grey Album was released in January 2004, and from there, Downhill Battle’s articulation to mashup (and remix culture more broadly) was a reactive, contingent process that manifested in part through their highly effective press releases. This activity led directly to
coverage on *Slashdot* and in *Wired* – key nodes for the formation and dissemination of Internet metadiscourse (Streeter, 2011) – which helped to make this an Internet crusade, rather than a strictly musical one. In popular music circles, in fact, *The Grey Album* was received as primarily a contribution to rap music, by a known (but marginal) producer; it received good reviews, not great ones, in *The Boston Globe* and *Rolling Stone*. Nevertheless, Downhill Battle’s press release of 2nd February 2004 was titled: ‘Music Industry Outlaws Best Album of the Year’ (Downhill Battle, 2004).\(^5\)

### Web 2.0 culture and the desirable aesthetics of mashup

I have offered evidence to support the claim that mashup music’s relationship to Internet culture was neither inevitable nor inherent, but rather was a concerted linkage made by actors who held sufficient power to do so. However, given that the cultural construction of the Internet has always been contested and multitudinous, it is necessary to be more precise regarding the conception of the Internet that was held by these specific actors in that specific historical moment of Web 2.0. Limited space prohibits anything more than a brief overview here, for which I rely gratefully on studies that have paid greater attention to the historical periodization of Internet culture. In particular, I draw on work that has sought to elucidate the interrelation of competing ideas and visions stemming from the Internet’s multiple origins in military research, 1960s counterculture, entrepreneurialism and academia (Abbate, 1999; Finn and DuPont, 2020; Mosco, 2005; Rosenzweig, 1998; Stevenson, 2016; Streeter, 2011, 2017; Turner, 2006).

The Web 2.0 tech activists described above inherited a tendency to view the Internet as a discrete and separate realm from the offline world, to an extent that may seem odd to us today. The aforementioned connection with the EFF provides a notable institutional link to John Perry Barlow’s notorious ‘Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace’ (1996). However, the Web 2.0-era characterization of the Internet as a distinct space does not neatly correlate to Barlow’s fiery repudiation of state regulation; this later separatism was not necessarily about an anti-state position so much as a distrust of ‘old’ social institutions in general, including big corporations. It did not imply that the Internet and the offline world would never meet, but rather that the causal relationship would be one-way: the Internet was going to massively change the world, while itself remaining untouchable and unregulatable (primarily by virtue of its supposed immateriality).

In this view, the Internet would render borders and barriers (to trade, culture, movement, etc.) irrelevant and anachronistic – just as prior generations had predicted similar consequences would result from earlier media technologies such as of the telegraph, radio broadcasting and cable television. This relates to the prevalent ‘myths’ that Mosco identifies as operating within a discourse of the ‘digital sublime’: namely, that digital networks would bring about the ‘end of history’ and the ‘end of geography’ by allowing users to traverse space and time, more or less devoid of material concerns (Mosco, 2005).

This Web 2.0-era Internet culture also tended to characterize the Internet as open, and thus as permitting (or even enforcing) ‘flat’, non-hierarchical forms of social organization. Since the Internet made information freely available, it could no longer be siloed by elites as a source of power (although benefitting from this free information did require a certain autodidactic capacity, thus promising a meritocracy of self-starting tech-savants). In this respect, the ‘open source’ software movement of the 1990s was an essential precursor to Web 2.0-era ‘free culture’ advocacy. During the mid-2000s, the principles avowed by open source pioneers overlapped with a wider
societal interest in ‘the wisdom of crowds’ (Hesmondhalgh, 2019b: 267), and with claims that such ‘socialized’ production might not only be radically democratic, but also radically efficient.

Web 2.0 tech activists also inherited and employed a characterization of the Internet as surprising and unpredictable. This follows the computer’s cultural redefinition, in the second half of the 20th century, from a calculating machine for ‘command-and-control’ to an interactive, communicative tool that could ‘offer the person at the keyboard a world of relatively uncertain outcomes’ (Streeter, 2011: 172). This unpredictability also links to the widespread sense that the Internet was, in terms of its social impact, just beginning, and thus that this historical position prevented actors from really knowing what changes were in store (beyond knowing that they would be big). As then Wired editor Kevin Kelly proclaimed in 2005:

> there is only one time in the history of each planet when its inhabitants first wire up its innumerable parts to make one large Machine. Later that Machine may run faster, but there is only one time when it is born. You and I are alive at this moment. (2005)

My suggestion, then, is that these Web 2.0-era actors held – and, consciously or otherwise, helped to popularize – an understanding of the Internet as separate, as immaterial, as open, as flat, and as surprising. Above all, they held a belief in the power of Internet connectivity to join people together and to thereby create new knowledge formations that would radically erode the power of existing social institutions. Having thus summarized this shared perspective, we can return to the articulation at hand: what made mashup music seem an appropriate proxy for this particular cultural conception of the Internet?

First, aside from the specificity of their musical form, it matters that mashups are music – rather than, say, film or TV remixes (which were also prevalent at the time). Kyle Devine highlights our historic tendency to see music as the most immaterial of the arts and suggests that this conception leads us ‘to naturalize and sustain perceptions of musical cultures that are annexed from their material conditions’ (2019: 27). This notion is supported by comparing Grey Tuesday with another of Downhill Battle’s advocacy campaigns, from the same period, in which they sought to digitize and freely distribute the US civil rights documentary television series Eyes on the Prize. Here, they faced a much more substantial backlash, and interventions from family members of the series’ producer Henry Hampton, as well as lawyers representing the series’ production company, served to quickly curtail their plans (Penalver and Katyal, 2010: 3–8). In reality, music (digitalized or otherwise) is not immaterial (Devine, 2019), but it is the cultural form that we most frequently disassociate from such finicky concerns. And just as the rhetoric supporting the open source technology movement of this period was that ‘information wants to be free’ (a phrase purportedly coined by countercultural activist turned cyber-pioneer Stewart Brand), there is also a strong social sense – predating the Internet, Napster and so on – that music has a similar agentic drive towards freedom (Cusick, 2008).

Still, why mashup specifically? The obvious answer is that it was copyright infringing – and this has tended to be a scholarly focus (e.g. Tushnet, 2011) – but lots of musical material is copyright infringing, and there are various other kinds of music that can infringe on such rights: cover versions, for example, if royalties are not paid. Also, mashups aren’t necessarily copyright infringing – they are sometimes authorized (and very popular mashups occasionally gain post hoc clearance, as rightsholders seek to get in on the economic action). There is also lots of music that uses short samples or which embeds infringing samples in original material (especially hip-hop and electronic dance music). Copyright concerns alone are thus an insufficient explanation.
Furthermore, there are also musics that we might say seem more obviously ‘digital’ – such as video game, glitch and ‘chiptune’ music – and thus might seem to articulate more straightforwardly to a vision of technological possibilities. The sample-based character of mashups also raises the question: why should the sound of new media be made of old music?

A particular focus on the textual characteristics of mashups shows that their pertinence to Web 2.0 Internet culture was not just about the fact that they were copyright-infringing nor that they called notions of authorship into question. The actors who, as evidenced above, did the work of articulating mashups to the Internet, found other compatibilities between what their digital culture sought to bring into being and the qualities they located in mashup music. Here I focus on three aspects of mashup texts: their status as transparent, modular and genre-crossing.

It is worth making the somewhat obvious point that these aspects do not reside purely within the text as such. So, although my analysis proceeds as if textual meaning were an objective certainty, it should be understood as an effort to convince the reader, using the evidence available, that Web 2.0-era tech actors may have read mashups in something like this light. There is a danger of circular reasoning here: as in, the reason that this music seemed appropriate to certain people is because they found it appropriate. But this is precisely the circularity – or, more accurately, reflexivity – that articulation theory intends to elucidate, not by seeking a causal explanation (i.e. why did this happen) but by outlining the conditions of possibility that permitted a particular textual reading to emerge, and by exploring the consequences of that emergence.

One more methodological note: I engage here with mashups at the level of genre (i.e. as a type of text), rather than offering close analysis of any individual mashup. This means my focus is not on the affective resonances of any particular combination of samples, but rather on what all (or most) mashups might have in common, and what they might express collectively. Given this article’s focus on Web 2.0 and the democratization of culture, I highlight these three features because they seem to ‘say something’, textually, about mashup’s mode of production and consumption (and thus also about the present and future of digital culture).

**Transparency**

As outlined above, mashup music is by no means the only kind of music to use unauthorized samples. However, it is unique in that it uses long, recognizable samples, which give the impression of being more or less unedited (i.e. they may be chopped and reorganized, but their timbre remains intact). This seems to imbue mashups with a certain transparency: we know the songs being sampled, and we can hear them in the mashup more or less as they sound in our memory.

This textual characteristic seems to suggest something about the production process. Since we hear no direct evidence of a corporeal intervention on behalf of the producer, it seems that producers do not ‘perform’ the music, so much as signify through it. So, whereas musical ideas generally have to be physically brought into being – that is, transmogrified from idea into expression, through performance – mashups seem to collapse such distinctions. This suggests a parallel with a cultural conception of the Internet as immaterial, and with a longer-standing belief that digital technology would liberate users from material concerns. One early theorization of this comes from the ‘cyber-prophet’ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. In Vincent Mosco’s paraphrasing, Teilhard’s prophecy was that a ‘thinking layer’ – called the ‘noosphere’ – would develop ‘over’ the existing physical world, and thus ‘end history because, ultimately, [it] destroys the material...
substrate and frees itself to expand in pure thought’ (Mosco, 2005: 71; see also Barlow, 1994 on the ‘economy of mind’).

Mashups can seem to exist in this realm of ‘pure thought’. Thus, as well as being a merging of idea and expression, mashups also signify a triumph of mental over physical labour (and perhaps over labour altogether). This textual transparency also evidenced mashups’ democratic potential: since mashups seemed to consist of nothing but the idea, they also required no specialist musical training or equipment. Mashups’ transparent aesthetic was also suggestive of speed: the lack of distance between idea and expression seemed to remove any need for creativity to be an arduous process. (It is important to note that such speed and effortlessess is not in fact evidenced by such a transparent-seeming aesthetic. There is no reason to think producing mashups – which usually requires technological skill, access to equipment, imaginative and precise editing, management of harmonic incongruities etc. – is any quicker or easier than, say, writing and recording a three-chord, guitar-based song.)

Of course, mashup’s ‘anyone can do it’ ethos has a longer history in popular music, primarily in ‘DIY’ punk (the genre with which Downhill Battle had initially sought to articulate their political actions), but also in many other musical traditions that have queried the value of the mystified and marketized music industries. But what makes mashup distinct from most DIY productions is that, since it relies on recognizable samples chosen from a globally known pop repertoire, stepping outside of conventional cultural production does not also mean stepping outside of a kind of consumer comfort zone. Unlike DIY punk (beloved by music critics and aficionados, but not by a wider public), mashups are understandable without specialist knowledge. This made mashup a kind of subcultural music, but whose consumption required no particular kind of ‘subcultural capital’ (Thornton, 1995). Mashups, then, carry a kind of consumer-friendliness that is in keeping with Web 2.0 connectionist values: they posit cultural communication as effortless on both sides of the interaction, and as youth-led but intergenerationally compatible.

Modularity

Mashup breaks music recordings into clearly distinguishable bits. Popular music’s construction has rarely been non-modular – from the development of multi-track recording in the 1950s, to the loop-based, sectional construction of most contemporary hits – but mashups make modularity audible and conceivable in a particular way, and they retroactively map this modularity onto a history of recorded music. Music that may have seemed organic, and thus as the inextricable distillation of a socio-historical juncture, can now appear as divisible into actionable elements. Mashup producers can take the backbeat of seventies rock track, add the vocals from a nineties R&B track and thereby reveal their eternal compatibility. Mashup modularizes all previous music.

It is in this context that the potentially incongruous association of mashups and futurity is validated: mashup is a supra-music indicative of a new phase of creativity. There is again a clear congruence with the digital ‘end of history’ myths discussed by Mosco, and the notion of the digital as a layer built ‘above’ existing sociocultural formations. Mashup is not, in this reading, a post-modern form, since postmodern culture tends to see recycling as a coping mechanism, a means of artificially simulating something other than stasis. Rather, in their role as harbinger of digital culture, mashups posit a shifting of planes, ending the horizontal forward progress of musical development and initiating a vertical movement up towards a supra-culture that looks downwards at previous forms. Media scholar Aram Sinnreich, in his 2010 study of mashup and remix, describes this shift using the term ‘configurable culture’, which he sees as having strongly
egalitarian dimensions (Sinnreich, 2010). (Music critics, who did tend to see mashup as post-modern, were quick to conclude that its apparent lack of originality made it ‘a barren genre’ (Reynolds, 2011: 360)).

This sense of operating on popular music from above – combined with the aforementioned fact that, unlike other sample-based music, mashups are usually nothing but samples – also gives mashup a certain placeless quality. Whereas authenticity in popular music is often judged by how successfully a music seems to reflect its origins (e.g. to be the sound of the city), mashup’s combination of samples from different eras and different locations make them ‘neither here nor there’. One consequence of this is that mashup became a strongly global form of music, but in a literal rather than textual sense: producers from around the world could create popular mashups, drawing on a distinctly Anglo-American popular music canon, and thereby not offering any stylistic, vocal or instrumental cues which might cause them to be read as ‘other’. As such – like the Internet itself – mashup quite sincerely proposes universalism, but with the adoption of a specific set of sociocultural norms as a condition of engagement. More pertinently, in this context, mashup’s textual placelessness allowed it to be read as a genre that lived nowhere but within the network. Thus, mashups were not just sound on the Internet, they were the sound of the Internet.

**Genre-crossing**

Most popular mashups in the mid-2000s brought together samples from clearly different musical genres. The genre-crossing in Freelance Hellraiser’s ‘A Stroke of Genie-us’, which matched Christina Aguilera’s R&B inflected teen-pop with The Strokes’ motorik rock’n’roll revivalism, created a ‘synthesis’ that Village Voice critic Douglas Wolk argued was ‘cooler and sexier and tenser than either of its sources [...]’. Each is what the other one was missing all along’ (2002). This mildly transgressive pleasure articulates to political subversion if one sees genre formation in popular music as a restrictive, industry-led program, rather than a ‘bottom-up’ social expression. Such a reading informs Michael Serazio’s account of mashups’ relation to genre:

Most FM radio patterns have, over the years, prevented a juxtaposition of Jay-Z and the Beatles from occurring; stations, channels, and shelves at the music store help keep the genres separate. A mashup combining the two can be read in some sense as liberation from the cultural power structure that endlessly carves up those micro-niche fan bases. (Serazio, 2008: 87)

It is through this politicized, sample-based genre-crossing that mashup seems to connect most clearly to a Web 2.0 Internet culture. This again relates to the Internet’s vaunted ability to cross all kinds of borders and boundaries (Mosco, 2005: 89), and to function as a communicative space in which anyone could meet anyone, and where novel alliances could be formed. In particular, it relates to the notion that – in the words of journalist Frances Cairncross – ‘the invisible strands of global communications’ would permit ‘humanity’ to become ‘less susceptible to propaganda from politicians who seek to stir up conflicts’ (2001: 279). The role of the Internet here is to reveal the artificiality of difference. Mashup, similarly, is a place where all genres meet and realize they had more in common than they had supposed; in a sense, they discover music as their ‘universal language’. Mashups thus provided a crude homology for the capacity of the Internet’s connective powers to overpower pre-existing social stratifications.

There is a universalist (or perhaps multiculturalist) ethic underlying the mashup scene ‘itself’, too – that is, aside from its articulation to Web 2.0. Adriana A, a mashup producer who has been
active since the mid-2000s, suggests that ‘the world would [...] be a better place if more people figured out what we have in common rather than focusing on the differences, and mashups are like this microcosm, a three-minute MP3 that can embody this ideal’ (Adriana A, personal interview). But there is a different context worth elucidating: mashup’s own history has substantial roots in queer culture and in that setting it operates, like drag performance, as a playful, temporary (but not arbitrary) crossing of boundaries – with the political critique located in how such playfulness causes us to reflect on the social construction of restrictive subjectivities (Butler, 1996: 378–381; Newton, 1979). For Web 2.0-era activists, the queer heritage of the genre does not seem to have been especially pertinent. Mashup’s genre-crossing playfulness would more likely have evoked for them the cultural archetype of the hacker – the well-meaning ‘trickster’ who is ‘driven to connect worlds that are divided by law or social convention’ (Mosco, 2005: 47; see also Coleman and Golub, 2008). Either way, the playfulness of mashup music, and listeners’ propensity to find mashups funny, was undoubtedly important for imbuing the form with a sense of communicative speed and quick-wittedness that could come to seem characteristic of the Internet itself.

**Mashups and the platforms of today**

Mashups’ role in shaping perceptions of participatory culture can be contextualized by noting that, during this period, music industry groups such as the British Phonographic Industry aimed to blur distinctions between very different forms of unlawful activity in an attempt ‘to forge a connection in consumers’ minds between ‘piracy’ and organized crime, and even terrorism’ (Williamson and Cloonan, 2007: 308). Public awareness campaigns sought to show file-sharing as an act of penny-pinching grubbiness, rather than glamorous techno-rebellion (Parkes, 2013). Meanwhile, mashups helped to suggest something else: that participation in and through new media might *necessarily* entail the ‘borrowing’ of old media – legally or otherwise. This helped lobbyists like the EFF frame file-sharing as necessary ‘civil disobedience’, and existing media rights holders as luddites attempting to hold back a (purportedly unstoppable) tide of vernacular creativity (Lobato, 2011). As I have shown, this articulation drew on mashups’ textual attributes, and their perceived implications of post-labour abundance, familiar-yet-radical modular creativity and boundary-crossing universalism.

Arguably, this articulation has had beneficial effects for today’s dominant platforms: mashup music served as demonstratable proof of the novelty of digital culture, while obscuring questions of ownership, labour and reward. It suggested that the archetypal form of online culture was particularly immaterial and particularly easy to make, helping to characterize online culture as unlaboured (and unpaid) semiotic play, and as a progression *beyond*, rather than a rival to, existing cultural industries. It also allowed platforms to benefit from the circulation of texts that their creators could not make a strong ownership claim over. Mashup, then, often presented as a musical culture that *needed* the Internet, should also be understood as a music culture that the Internet needed. Part of this stems from their function as a *cause celebre* for copyright infringement, but this infringement came bundled with other textual features which helped to instantiate an apparently clear divide between ‘piracy’ and ‘participatory’.

To be clear, there is no substantial evidence to suggest that, in that moment, the tech activists behind Grey Tuesday were anything other than well intentioned. Rather, the compatibility of free market neoliberal economics with the Web 2.0-era valorization of ‘openness’, participation and playfulness was in itself a broad, complex articulation, one that was only beginning to be seriously
exploited by Silicon Valley. Such an articulation was critical to the formation of the platformized cultural economy of today but seems inevitable only in hindsight.

A further consequence of the strong articulation between mashup and technology has been to diminish mashup producers’ capacity to steer their own course. Mashup producers themselves were rarely at the frontline of digital activism in the mid-2000s, yet their work was overwhelmingly and reductively framed as a battle of ICT’s liberatory potential versus music industries property hoarding; today the articulation between mashups and technologists is more or less totally unlinked. Stuart Cunningham and David Craig argue that the world of ‘social media entertainment’ is no longer defined by ‘narrow rights battles with legacy media’ (2019: 8); instead today’s landscape is characterized by interdependency – a relationship borne out through significant financial integration between media and ICT corporations (Costine, 2017; Ingham, 2020). Most platforms are no longer as lenient towards the unauthorized use of copyrighted material – mashed up or otherwise (see Brøvig-Hanssen and Jones, forthcoming). Occasionally, this re-aligned media constellation has shone favourably on mashup producers who, as outlined above, were never truly ‘outside’ of the music industries. For the most part though, the situation is worse now for mashup producers in terms of circulatory potential, and some of them locate a hypocrisy in the speed at which platforms (literally) changed their tune. New York-based mashup producer CFLO told us: ‘I had two videos up for Vimeo awards in the remix category, two years in a row, and then they banned my account. The same platform that said “we’re gonna give you an award” took my account away’ (CFLO, interview).

The world of tech policy activism, so quick to mobilize in support of Grey Tuesday, doesn’t talk about mashups much today. Technology reporter April Glaser has suggested that the EFF’s tendency to campaign against states’ use of technologies, rather than against Silicon Valley firms’ comparable practices, ‘probably has to do with the founding principles behind a lot of internet advocacy, which has its origins in libertarian and anti-regulation philosophies’ (2018). In truth, the EFF is (and was) a broader ideological church than media coverage sometimes suggests. But there is a complex economic dimension, too: the activism of groups like the EFF and the Participatory Cultural Foundation continue to be financially supported by myriad funding sources connected to key figures at Google and other ICT giants, in arrangements too complex to unpack here (Glaser, 2018). For whatever reason, the same people and organizations who were willing to fight ‘old’ media on behalf of mashup producers are now less keen to take that fight to ‘new’ media.

In the mid-2000s, the threat to mashup culture’s ‘resistant credibility’ was seen to be ‘[a]ppropriation [. . .] by the institutions of commercial music culture’, via ‘officially-sanctioned’ mashups (Serazio, 2008: 88). But with hindsight we can see that emerging Internet platforms were quite able to ‘appropriate’, too. We can see that the textual characteristics that made mashup feel like a democratic starting point also made it redolent of the immense economic possibility of unfettered circulation. We can also see that the offered vision of cultural democracy came with very particular limitations and omissions. Mashup music, in its articulation to technological possibilities, was never a form that said very much about cultural diversity (since instead it universalized a specifically Anglo-American culture), or about fair remuneration (since it presented itself as ‘above’ economic concerns), to take just two of the strands that we might think of cultural democratization as entailing (Hesmondhalgh, 2019a).

While my aim here has been to show that cultural texts have had an important relationship to politically charged technological visions, it is important to note that culture – and in this case, music – isn’t just another kind of rhetoric. Even bearing in mind its capacity to articulate to specific political and sociocultural visions, the value and relevance of culture is not in its capacity to offer
another way of presenting the facts. Nor is it simply a tool by which to draw an audience, to act as the sugar-coating that permits a surreptitious dose of ideology. Cultural texts can seem to be ‘living out’ technological promise in a way that the bare, concrete existence of the technology cannot (although software and hardware can of course carry affective dimensions and cultural meanings, too). I want to conclude by noting another area where the consequences of such ‘promise’ might be felt: contemporary new media research.

Coda: Digital optimism now and then

In contemporary media research that seeks to critically analyse Web 2.0 or to identify its relation to the contemporary digital economy (i.e. ‘platformization’), it is standard practice to spend an early paragraph lambasting the digital optimists who, in the early 2000s, saw deep and diverse potential in networked communication while failing to see (or sufficiently acknowledge) its accompanying obstacles and threats. As I’ve shown, the vast majority of mashup scholarship of the mid- to late-2000s was certainly of this optimistic kind. It is clear that academics, especially in and around cultural studies, loved mashups – partly, perhaps, because they offered terra nova for speculative theorizing, regardless of whether one found the music enjoyable or not. Explicit in most mashup scholarship of the period is some belief that this music really did offer evidence of a serious disruption of cultural power. And, as with the technologists who adopted mashup as their own, only part of the appeal stemmed from its threat to copyright and authorship. Like those technologists, scholars had a tendency to link certain features in the text to particular social relations they were supposed to symbolize (see Fairchild, 2014: 57–62). A belief in the connectionist potential of mashups – this purported homology between cultural form and social function – served to obscure and distort understanding of the emerging harms and inequalities which also hinged on such connectivity.

The impulse to use our hindsight to critique digital optimism is understandable: it offers some reassurance that theoretical, empirical or at very least temporal gains have been made. It is also difficult not to look back with some frustration. Web 2.0 was a moment of flux in which scholars had some capacity to ‘break through’ and participate in the discussion and application of new ideas (Streeter, 2011: 163–67), yet the ideas chosen seem to have been the wrong ones. As Hesmondhalgh notes, the ‘misleading picture’ offered by digital optimism ‘ultimately helped lay the ground for the rise of the IT mega-corporations [. . . ] and the problematic “digital culture” that so many of us now inhabit globally’ (Hesmondhalgh, 2019b: 269).

Certainly, very few of us are digital optimists today. We mostly treat the Internet as mundane, even in the ways in which it threatens and limits our capacities for flourishing (Prior, 2015). And yet still, the idea of something being (as mashup arguably was) the sound of the Internet has a seductive ring to it. It isn’t yet emptied of futurity in the way that the sound of radio is, say. This irony – this general feeling of optimism without positivity – is encapsulated in the interpretation of ‘optimism’ offered in the critical theory of Lauren Berlant. She suggests that optimism operates not as a particular affective state (i.e. feeling happy or excited about the future), but rather an affective structure, in which we make attachments to objects – which might be people, things, places, feelings, whatever – that seem to provide a particular ‘cluster of promises’ (Berlant, 2011: 23). These promises may be good for us or they may in fact be the very thing that stands in the way of our flourishing – hence Berlant’s book title, Cruel Optimism.

So, our banishment of digital optimism doesn’t rid us of the sense in which, as Berlant puts it, ‘all attachments are optimistic’ (2011: 23). This means that we – as scholars, as Internet users, as
situated groups of people with specific hopes and needs – will likely continue to affiliate technologies with any number of ‘clusters of promises’. Accordingly, the cultural texts that articulate technological possibilities today must surely still function optimistically, as the place where promises are made – even if we don’t love what they promise. The lesson of digital optimism then is not simply to choose steady scepticism over giddy hype (i.e. to hedge one’s bets), but rather to pay close analytical attention to how and why relationships between technology and culture are formed and sustained.

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**Notes**

1. Academic work on mashups continues apace but, since that initial flurry in the mid- to late-2000s, scholarship has mostly focused on developing and expanding aesthetic theories of mashups (Adams, 2015; Boone, 2013; Brøvig-Hanssen, 2016); the tendency to link mashups to technology-led social change has greatly decreased.

2. This article makes sporadic use of material from interviews with mashup producers conducted in 2019, as part of the broader research project MASHED, led by Ragnhild Brøvig-Hanssen.

3. Their association with Albini is ironic, considering his later disparagement of sampling as ‘extraordinarily lazy’ and ‘embarrass[ing]’ (Franzen, 2010).

4. Online message boards were important for the nascent mashup scene, but primarily for developing a shared understanding and evaluation of craft and technique in the genre, rather than for the wide distributive reach that is often presented as a key affordance of the Internet for cultural producers (again, see McGranahan, 2010).

5. Oddly, Downhill Battle’s press release is dated 2nd February 2004, yet quotes a Rolling Stone review that doesn’t seem to have been published until 5th February. This, along with some other discrepancies, makes it difficult to discern precisely when Downhill Battle became involved. Since a cease-and-desist letter from EMI doesn’t seem to have arrived until 10th February, it seems likely that the lobbying group were a key force in gaining publicity for the record, creating the possibility that EMI would ‘take the bait’ – thus permitting the broader campaign.

6. This isn’t to say that mashup scenes didn’t develop their own internal logics of expertise and credibility (Shiga, 2007; see also footnote 4), but only that consumer enjoyment didn’t seem to rely on these logics, and indeed seemed relatively autonomous from them.

7. William Gibson, the influential science fiction writer who coined the term ‘cyberspace’, has called remix and ‘recombinant’ culture (specifically including mashups) ‘the very nature of the digital’ (2005).

8. This reading is relatively common and has nuanced variants; Keith Negus argues that ‘the music industry rewards and recognizes certain genre practices’, and that it tends to ‘act to divide and constrain […] potential fluid, multiple influences and genre crossings’ (2013: 6)

9. Vimeo is a video streaming platform founded in 2007 – they still present awards annually in a variety of categories.
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