

Going Hard: Bassweight, Sonic Warfare, & the "Brostep" Aesthetic

Mike D'Errico

Blog post published January 23, 2014 in *Sounding Out!*

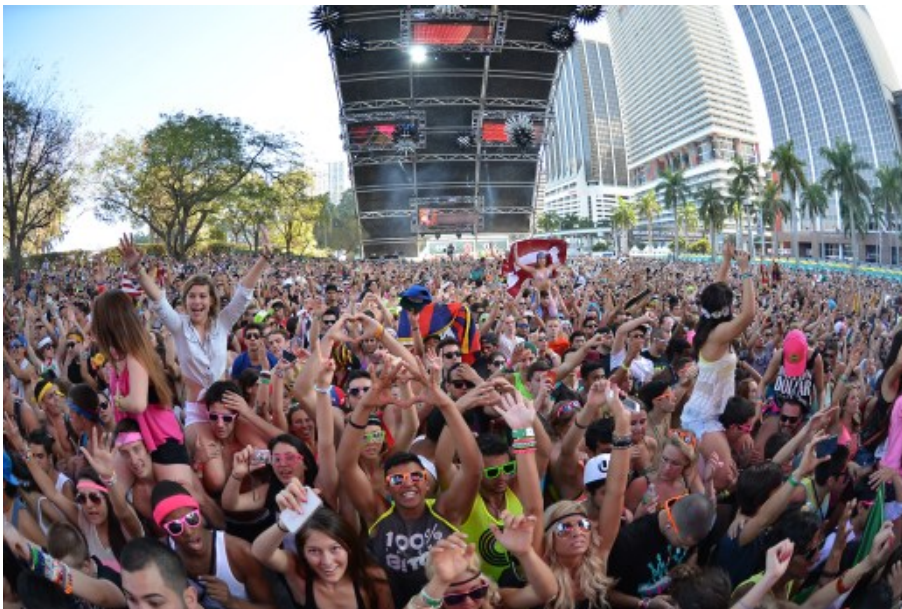
<https://doi.org/10.59350/4e3q9-nt214>

Abstract

[Editor's Note 01/24/14 10:00 am: this post has been corrected. In response to a critique from DJ Rupture, the author has apologized for an initial misquoting of an article by Julianne Escobedo Shepherd, and edited the phrase in question.]

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Music History and Culture (Topic), Acoustics, American Studies, Article, Cultural Studies, Dance/Movement

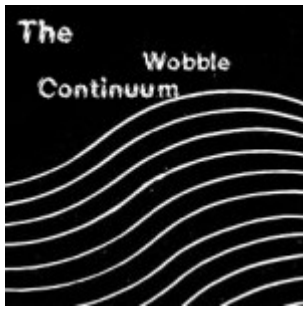


Recommended citation

D'Errico, M. (2014, January 23). Going Hard: Bassweight, Sonic Warfare, & the "Brostep" Aesthetic. *Sounding Out!*. <https://doi.org/10.59350/4e3q9-nt214>

Copyright

Copyright © Mike D'Errico 2014. Distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.



[Editor's Note 01/24/14 10:00 am: this post has been corrected. In response to a critique from [DJ Rupture](#), the author has apologized for an initial misquoting of an article by Julianne Escobedo Shepherd, and edited the phrase in question. Please see Comments section for discussion]

Time to ring the bell: this year, **Sounding Out!** is opening a brand-new stream of content to run on Thursdays. Every few weeks, we'll be bringing in a new **Guest Editor** to curate a series of posts on a particular theme that opens up new ground in areas of thought and practice where sound meets media. Most of our writers and editors will be new to the site, and many will be joining us from the ranks of the **Sound Studies** and **Radio Studies Scholarly Interest Groups** at the **Society for Cinema and Media Studies**, as well as from the **Sound Studies Caucus** from the **American Studies Association**. I'm overjoyed to come on board as **SCMS/ASA Editor** to help curate this material, working with my good friends here at **SO!**

For our first Guest series, let me welcome [Justin Burton](#), Assistant Professor of Music at Rider University, where he teaches in the [Popular Music and Culture program](#). Justin also serves on the executive committee of the [International Association for the Study of Popular Music-US Branch](#). We're honored to have Justin help us launch this new stream.

His series? He calls it **The Wobble Continuum**. Let's follow him down into the low frequencies to learn more ...

Neil Verma

—

Things have gotten wobbly. The cross-rhythms of low-frequency oscillations (LFO) pulsate through dance and pop music, bubbling up and dropping low across the radio dial. At its most extreme, the wobble both rends and sutures, tearing at the rhythmic and melodic fabric of a song at the same time that it holds it together on a structural level. In this three-part series, **Mike D'Errico**, **Christina Giacona**, and **Justin D Burton** listen to the wobble from a number of vantage points, from the user plugged into the Virtual Studio Technology (VST) of a Digital Audio Workstation (DAW) to the sounds of the songs themselves to the listeners awash in bass tremolos. In remixing these components—musician, music, audience—we trace the unlikely material activities of sounds and sounders.

In our first post, Mike will consider the ways a producer working with a VST is not simply inputting commands but is collaborating with an entire culture of maximalism, teasing out an ethics of brostep production outside the usual urge for transcendence. In the second post, Christina will

listen to the song "Braves" by a Tribe Called Red (ATCR), which, through its play with racist signifiers, remixes performer and audience, placing ATCR and its listeners in an uncanny relationship. In the final post, Justin will work with Karen Barad's theory of posthuman performativity to consider how the kind of hypermasculinist and racist signifiers discussed in Mike's and Christina's pieces embed themselves in listening bodies that become sounding bodies. In each instance, we wade into the wobble listening for the flow of activity among the entanglement of producer, sound, and listener while also keeping our ears peeled for the cross-rhythms of (hyper)masculinist and racist materials that course through and around the musical phenomena.

So hold on tight. It's about to drop.

Justin Burton

—

As an electronic dance music DJ and producer, an avid video gamer, a cage fighting connoisseur, and a die-hard Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson fan, I'm no stranger to fist pumps, headshots, and what has become a general cultural sensibility of "hardness" associated with "bro" culture. But what broader affect lies behind this culture? Speaking specifically to recent trends in popular music, Simon Reynolds describes a "digital maximalism," in which cultural practice involves "a hell of a lot of inputs, in terms of influences and sources, and a hell of a lot of outputs, in terms of density, scale, structural convolution, and sheer majesty" ("Maximal Nation"). We could broaden this concept of maximalism, both (1) to describe a wider variety of contemporary media (from film to video games and mobile media), and (2) to theorize it as a tool for transducing affect between various media, and among various industries within global capitalism. The goal of this essay is to tease out the ways in which maximalist techniques of one kind of digital media production—dubstep—become codified as broader social and political practices. Indeed, the proliferation of maximalism suggests that hypermediation and hypermasculinity have already become dominant aesthetic forms of digital entertainment.



"DJ Pauly D" by Flickr user Eva Rinaldi, CC-BY-SA-2.0

More than any other electronic dance music (EDM) genre, dubstep—and the various hypermasculine cultures in which it has bound itself—has wholeheartedly embraced "digital maximalism" as its core aesthetic form. In recent years, the musical style has emerged as both the dominant idiom within EDM culture, as well as the soundtrack to various hypermasculine forms of entertainment, from sports such as football and professional wrestling to action movies and first-person shooter video games. As a result of the music's widespread popularity within the specific cultural space of a post-*Jersey Shore* "bro" culture, the term "[brostep](#)" has emerged as an accepted title for the ultra-macho, adrenaline-pumping performances of masculinity that have defined contemporary forms of digital entertainment. This essay posits digital audio production practices in "brostep" as hypermediated forms of masculinity that exist as part of a broader cultural and aesthetic web of media convergence in the digital age.

CONVERGENCE CULTURES

Media theorist Henry Jenkins defines "convergence culture" as "the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want" ([Convergence Culture](#), 2). The most prominent use of "brostep" as a transmedial form comes from video game and movie trailers. From the fast-paced, neo-cyborg and alien action thrillers such as [Transformers](#) (2007-present), [Cowboys & Aliens](#) (2011), and [G.I.](#)

Joe (2012), to dystopian first-person shooter video games such as *Borderlands* (2012), *Far Cry 3* (2012), and *Call of Duty: Black Ops 2* (2012), modulated oscillator wobbles and bass portamento drops consistently serve as sonic amplifiers of the male action hero at the edge.



<https://youtu.be/osvAiV-y9dl>

Assault rifle barrages are echoed by quick rhythmic bass and percussion chops, while the visceral contact of pistol whips and lobbed grenades marks ruptures in time and space as slow motion frame rates mirror bass "drops" in sonic texture and rhythmic pacing. "Hardness" is the overriding affect here; compressed, gated kick and snare drum samples combine with coagulated, "overproduced" basslines made up of multiple oscillators vibrating at broad frequency ranges, colonizing the soundscape by filling every chasm of the frequency spectrum. The music—and the media forms with which it has become entwined—has served as the affective catalyst and effective backdrop for the emergence of an unabashedly assertive, physically domineering, and adrenaline-addicted "bro" culture.

Film theorist Lorrie Palmer argues for a relational link among gender, technology, and modes of production through hypermasculinity in these types of films and video games. Some definitive features of this convergence of hypermediation and hypermasculinity include an emphasis on "excess and spectacle, the centrality of surface over substance... ADHD cinema... transitory kinetic sensations that decenter spatial legibility... an impact aesthetic, [and] an ear-splitting, frenetic style" ("*Cranked Masculinity*," 7). Both [Robin James](#) and [Steven Shaviro](#) have defined the overall aesthetic of these practices as "post-cinematic": a regime "centered on computer games" and emphasizing "the logic of control and gamespace, which is the dominant logic of entertainment programming today." On a sonic level, "brostep" aligns itself with many of these cinematic descriptions. [Julianne Escobedo](#) *Shepherd describes the style* of Borgore, one particular dubstep DJ and producer, as "misogy blow-job beats." Other commenters have made more obvious semiotic connections between filmic imagery and the music, as [Nitsuh Abebe](#) *describes brostep basslines* as conjuring "obviously cool images like being inside the gleaming metal torso of a planet-sized robot while it punches an even bigger robot."



"Ultra Music Festival 2013" by Wikimedia user Vinch, CC-BY-SA-3.0

MASCULINITY AND DIGITAL AUDIO PRODUCTION

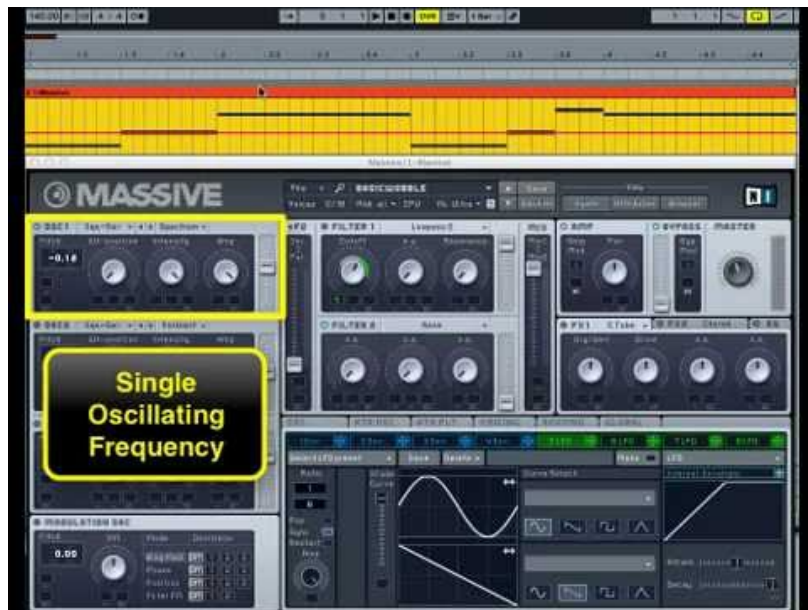
While the sound has developed gradually over at least the past decade, the ubiquity of the distinctive mid-range "brostep" wobble bass can fundamentally be attributed to a single instrument. *Massive*, a software synthesizer developed by the Berlin and Los Angeles-based [Native Instruments](#), combines the precise timbral shaping capabilities of modular synthesizers with the real-time automation capabilities of digital waveform editors. As a [VST \(Virtual Studio Technology\)](#) plug-in, the device exemplifies the inherently transmedial nature of many digital tools, bridging studio techniques between digital audio workstations and analog synthesis, and acting as just one of many control signals within the multi-windowed world of digital audio production. In this way, *Massive* may be characterized as an intersonic control network in which sounds are controlled and modulated by other sounds through constantly shifting software algorithms. Through analysis of the intersubjective control network of a program such as *Massive* we are able to hear the convergence of hypermediation and hypermasculinity as aesthetic forms.



"Massive:Electronica" by Flickr user matt.searles, CC-BY-NC-SA-2.0

Media theorist Mara Mills details the notion of technical "scripts" embedded both within technological devices as well as user experiences. According to Mills, scripts are best defined as "the representation of users embedded within technology... Designers do not simply 'project' users into [technological devices]; these devices are inscribed with the competencies, tolerances, desires, and psychoacoustics of users" ("[Do Signals Have Politics?](#)" 338). In short, electroacoustic objects have politics, and in the case of *Massive*, the politics of the script are quite conventional and historically familiar. The rhythmic and timbral control network of the software aligns itself with what Tara Rodgers describes as a long history of violent masculinist control logics in electronic music, from DJs "battling" to producers "triggering" a sample with a "controller" or "executing" a programming "command" or typing a "bang" to send a signal" ("[Towards a Feminist Historiography of Electronic Music](#)," 476).

In *Massive*, the primary control mechanism is the [LFO \(low frequency oscillator\)](#), an infrasonic electronic signal whose primary purpose is to modulate various parameters of a synthesizer tone. Dubstep artists most frequently apply the LFO to a [low-pass filter](#), generating a control algorithm in which an LFO filters and masks specific frequencies at a periodic rate (thus creating a "wobbling" frequency effect), which, in turn, modulates the cutoff frequency of up to three oscillating frequencies at a time (maximizing the "wobble"). When this process is applied to multiple oscillators simultaneously—each operating at disparate levels of the frequency spectrum—the effect is akin to a spectral and spatial form of what Julian Henriques calls "[sonic dominance](#)." *Massive* allows the user to record "automations" on the rhythm, tempo, and quantization level of the bass wobble, effectively turning the physical gestures initially required to create and modulate synthesizer sounds—such as knob-turning and fader-sliding—into digitally-inscribed algorithms.



https://youtu.be/Jcn_mrQE2xo

SONIC WARFARE AND THE ETHICS OF VIRTUALITY

By positing the logic of digital audio production within a broader network of control mechanisms in digital culture, I am not simply presenting a hermeneutic metaphor. Convergence media has not only shaped the content of various multimedia but has redefined digital form, allowing us to witness a clear—and potentially dangerous—virtual politics of viral capitalism. The emergence of a [Military Entertainment Complex](#) (MEC) is the most recent instance of this virtual politics of convergence, as it encompasses broad phenomena including the use of [music as torture](#), the design of [video games for military training](#) (and increasing collaboration between military personnel and video game designers in general), and [drone warfare](#). The defining characteristic of this political and virtual space is a desire to simultaneously redefine the limits of the physical body and overcome those very limitations. The MEC, as well as broader digital convergence cultures, has molded this desire into a coherent hegemonic aesthetic form.

Following videogame theorist Jane McGonigal, virtual environments push the individual to "work at the very limits of their ability" in a state of infinite self-transition ([Reality is Broken](#), 24). Yet, automation and modular control networks in the virtual environments of digital audio production continue to encourage the historical masculinist trope of "mastery," thus further solidifying the connection between music and military technologies sounded in the examples above. In detailing hypermediation and hypermasculinity as dominant aesthetic forms of digital entertainment, it is not my goal to simply reiterate the Adornian nightmare of "rhythm as coercion," or the more recent [Congressional fears](#) over the potential for video games and other media to cause violence. The fact that music and video games in the MEC are simultaneously being used to reinscribe the systemic violence of the Military Industrial Complex, as well as to create virtual and actual communities (DJ culture and the proliferation of online music and gaming communities), pinpoints precisely its hegemonic capabilities.



"Gear porn" by Flickr user Matthew Trentacoste, CC-BY-NC-ND-2.0

In the face of the perennial "mastery" trope, I propose that we must develop a relational ethics of virtuality. While it seems to offer the virtue of a limitless infinity for the autonomous (often male) individual, technological interfaces form the skin of the ethical subject, establishing the boundaries of a body both corporeal and virtual. In the context of digital audio production, then, the producer is not struggling against the technical limitations of the material interface, but rather emerging from the multiple relationships forming at the interface between one's actual and virtual self and embracing a contingent and liminal identity; to quote philosopher Adriana Cavarero, "a fragile and unmasterable self" (*Relating Narratives*, 84).

—

Featured Image: Skrillex – Hovefestivalen 2012 by Flickr User NRK P3

—

Mike D'Errico is a PhD student in the UCLA Department of Musicology and a researcher at the Center for Digital Humanities. His research interests and performance activities include hip-hop, electronic dance music, and sound design for software applications. He is currently working on a dissertation that deals with digital audio production across media, from electronic dance music to video games and mobile media. Mike is the web editor and social media manager for the US branch of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music, as well as two UCLA music journals, *Echo: a music-centered journal* and *Ethnomusicology Review*.

—



REWIND! ...If you liked this post, you may also dig:

[Toward a Practical Language for Live Electronic Performance](#)-Primus Luta

[Music Meant to Make You Move: Considering the Aural Kinesthetic](#)-Dr. Imani Kai Johnson

[Listening to Robots Sing: GarageBand on the iPad](#)-Aaron Trammell