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Trying to fit in with the weird parts of the Internet: Online subcultures and content creation

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TRYING TO FIT IN WITH THE WEIRD PARTS OF THE INTERNET:
ONLINE SUBCULTURES AND CONTENT CREATION

A Thesis Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Designation
University Honors

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University Honors with Distinction or University Honors (select appropriate designation)

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Date Matthew Wilson, Honors Thesis Advisor

Date Dr. Jessica Moon, Director, University Honors Program

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Creating my thesis project has been quite a journey - perhaps a longer and more tedious journey than I anticipated, but rewarding nonetheless. Starting this project in the fall, I simply had the goal of making cool music, producing videos to accompany it, and getting some people to watch it. This is much easier said than done, however.

In my head, this was to be a pretty straightforward project. I had made electronic music before and had been improving at it. I had edited some videos, though not for a few years. And I had experimented with marketing content. The reality, of course, is that doing a good job at anything takes a lot of time and effort. I ended up learning lessons not just about the area I focused on, but about structuring a project and working independently. Some of this came from mistakes made along the way, some from successes. In the end (and as I write this, it is really *not* the end of the project) I think I have walked away with a great deal of knowledge gained, a new potential career path, and some solid work to show for the effort I put in.

My work was essentially divided into four areas: Ableton Live, Adobe After Effects, video and narrative concepts, and online marketing. Two of these areas are applications I learned to use, two of them more conceptual. Although I list these areas in somewhat the order I learned about them, this really was not a linear, “point a to point b” research project. Just as I thought I had finished one step or gotten a solid grasp of one concept, I would encounter new information, changing my view on the work I had just completed.

My basic starting point was Ableton Live. Ableton is one of the most popular pieces of digital audio software. It is an excellent program, but has a definite learning

curve to it. My initial perception was if I had a good sense of how to use the program, I would be able to make good music. Making music is not all technical skill though, and I ended up spending more time thinking and learning about composition than about the technical features of Ableton. This was far from the only time my initial perceptions about what this project would involve were proven wrong!

The next program I delved into was Adobe After Effects, as well as Adobe Premiere. After Effects is essentially Photoshop for video. It allows for a great deal of manipulation of digital images. After Effects has been used in most (if not all) movies released in recent years. For me personally, the learning curve was pretty intense with this program. The user interface is effective for those with experience, but very intimidating to a beginner. The amount of flexibility is pretty limitless. This is great now - if I can imagine an effect, with enough time and effort I can probably create it. However, when first using the program the options are overwhelming. Again, I figured that with a decent knowledge of the program's functions, I would be ready to create a video. However, watching tutorials and knowing what every button does is really just the beginning. Creating compositions that are organized in an understandable way and do not cause issues later on proved to be one of my biggest challenges.

Beyond simply compositing the video I wanted, developing a narrative behind my work was a huge learning experience for me. Whether for class or work, most of the visual creation I had dealt with before involved a previously created storyline. I had a good sense of how to create some cool looking visuals. Linking them together in a rational way was something I had not considered. This is an area I am still working on, and feel like I am getting better at every day.

The final, ongoing part of my project is marketing what I create. In retrospect, I probably should have saved this step for another project. The internet is a complex web. Understanding how to create content that will appeal to a variety of subcultures and communities is incredibly complicated. This is the step of the project that I see continuing for months, maybe even years. Things do not always blow up or go viral overnight, and to make a piece of content do so takes planning, organization, and some really good content!

That said, I feel like I have learned a great deal about what tactics are effective and ineffective already. Experimentation and trying out different tactics is the only way to learn what does and does not work, and without this opportunity to do so in a safe academic setting, I might have taken the wrong approach in a situation with higher consequence, and more important content. On the whole, I ended up realizing this was a much deeper project than simply learning programs and marketing what I made in them. Really, this was a branding project. It has allowed me to explore what my own unique content looks like. I have developed more of an original style, although my work is still pretty derivative of my influences. Finally, it has gotten me started creating the kind of thing I want to continue to do for the foreseeable future. This thesis is not a project I am finishing, but really just beginning. To explain what I did and where it has led me, I will elaborate on each area in a little more detail, giving a background and context to better understand my final product.

Upon starting this project, I had been experimenting with music and Ableton Live for about 6 months or so. My interest in electronic music and composition came from a few different sources. As a kid, I took piano lessons, and always found the piano to be an

interesting instrument. I had preferred messing around to actually playing compositions though, and hated having to practice songs that did not interest me. Most electronic composition uses programs and controllers based around a keyboard. For me, this allowed a more intuitive understanding of how to approach varied instrumentation. When every (virtual) instrument can be controlled through the same keyboard, it is a lot easier to understand how they all interact with each other in a composition.

Of course, if I had taken piano lessons for much of my childhood, and had access to the requisite technology, why did I just recently get into making music with computers? A combination of factors is responsible. In the last five to ten years, the electronic music scene has grown immensely. The music I make is not radio friendly pop. But hearing such an abundance of electronic music made me think, “Hey, maybe I could do that!” A few artists in particular intrigued me with their intricate arrangements: Flying Lotus, Aphex Twin, and Boards of Canada are some of my biggest influences. The idea that much of what these artists made was accomplished, or could be accomplished with simply a laptop was fascinating and motivational. Seeing artists rapidly gaining popularity in the EDM (Electronic Dance Music) scene and were only a few years older than me solidified the notion that I had the technology and time to pursue music creation.

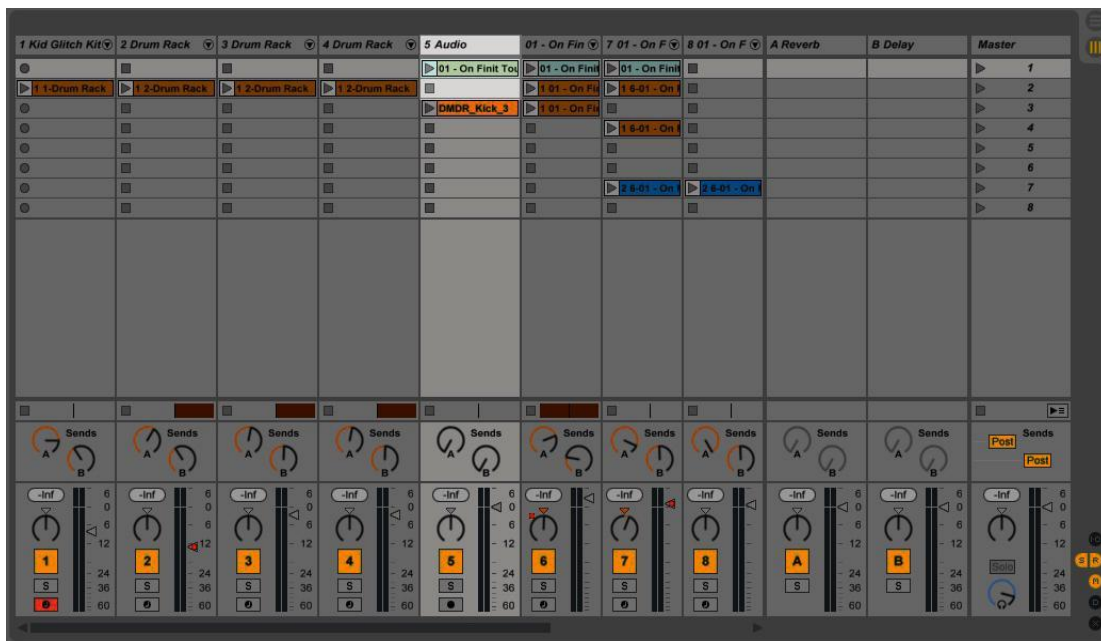
My initial experiments creating music concentrated primarily on taking existing songs (often soul or jazz samples) and manipulating them to fit into a hip-hop paradigm. Adding drums to a few bars of a sample could create beats that would be suitable for rapping over. Although I was not very good at it yet, I loved the idea of taking existing art and recontextualizing it.

An example of the creative process behind a beat

Step 1: Import your sample into Ableton

For this track, I chose to use a sample from The Vinyl Frontier, Pierre Porte's "On Finit Toujours Par Se Rejoindre Voice" from his [1971 Docteur Justice Original Soundtrack](#).

I think it is easiest to just drag an mp3 into an audio track and go from there. As you can see, I usually start out in the clip view of Ableton. Until I have chopped up my sample and laid down my first loop or two, this is usually where I will stay.

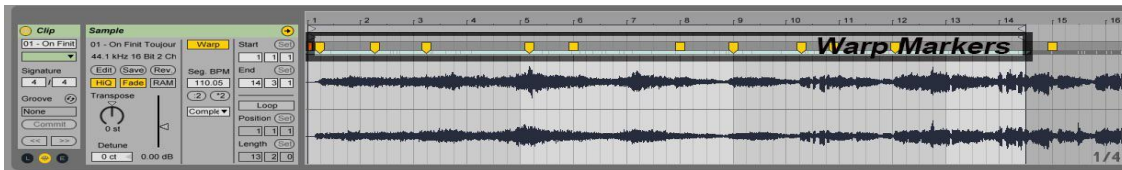


Step 2: Warping

Now we take advantage of some of Ableton's features that make it perfect for sampling.

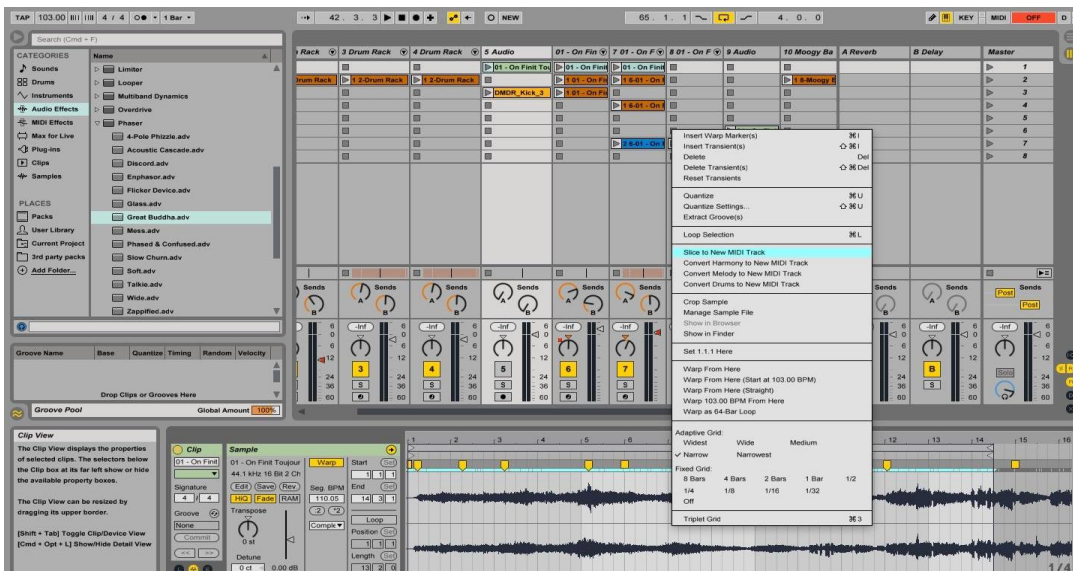
After listening to the track, I found the section that I wanted to sample and selected it.

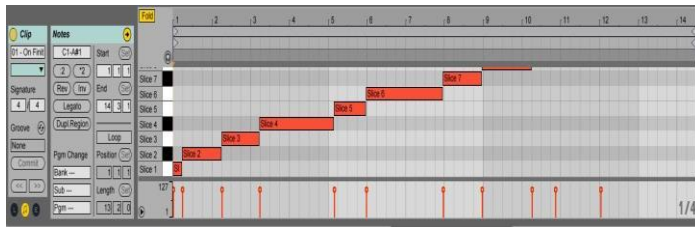
Then, I placed one of Ableton's warp markers (just click twice where I have labeled in the image) wherever I wanted the start and end of a sample to be.



Step 3: Slice to MIDI

After selecting what parts of the track I wanted to sample, I used one of Ableton’s best features for those who make sample based music – Slice to Midi. You can access this option by right clicking on audio in the sample display/clip editor. There are several different options to create slices. I chose “warp markers” since this option lets you pick right where your samples start and end. However, you can also choose to slice at transient points (basically where Ableton detects a change in the song) or just at a regular interval.





I now have another track in my project, with each of the bars lengths in the bottom box representing the lengths of the individual samples. You can play through these samples using either your keyboard and musical typing, or with a MIDI keyboard.

Step 4: Recording your samples

Now that you have a MIDI track of your samples, this track will behave just like any other MIDI track in Ableton. You can add effects, change the volume of individual samples, and record what you play. After messing around with different arrangements, I came up with a loop I liked and recorded it.

Step 5: Drums + Bass

No hip hop track would be complete without percussion of some kind, and my usual process is to start with samples, then move to drums. After coming up with a loop I liked, I decided to lay down a basic drum track to start with. To do this, I added a drum rack from the instrument tab in the content/browser pane.

A bass track is going to be pretty loud and take up a lot of your frequency by default. To help with this, and to keep the bass from drowning out the other drums, I added a

compressor from the effects tab in the browser pane. I used sidechain compression on my bass track, so that whenever there is a hit on the kick drum, the volume of the bass is reduced, keeping the mix from getting too muddy.

Step 6: Make it more interesting

If this sounds like pretty broad advice, that is because it is. Sure, you have got a pretty sweet loop going on, but who just wants to listen to the same loop without any change. From here on out, the advice for spicing up your track varies quite a bit. However, I will talk about a few things I did with this track in particular to make it better.

Adding in extra drum sounds and taking out existing ones can go a long way. Few listeners want to hear the exact same drum loops for an entire song, and switching it up can go a long way towards making a song more lively. You can see I added in some different kicks and cymbal hits. Honestly, listening to the 80% finished track below, I already thought of some more changes I want to make.

Adding some sound effects or transition effects can also go a long way in making a track sound more professional. Listening to the final version of this track, you can hear some sounds duck in and out throughout the track. Most the tracks have some reverb, some echo, and some panning effects applied. Phasers and chorus effects can sound cool and add depth as well.

Another thing I did on this track was cut up some other parts of the original sample, and put them on top of it. This added some nice mid range sounds that “evened out” the sound of the track. Below is the final arrangement:

<https://soundcloud.com/isakmadeit/on-finit-toujours>

As I improved my skills, I ventured more into original compositions with no samples used. This required quite a bit of learning on my part - coming up with all the ideas used in a song requires knowing melody and rhythm. The process of developing from making simple loops using samples to more complex beats and original compositions involved lots of experimenting with sounds - iterations upon iterations. I have made at least a hundred beats over the past six to eight months. Out of those maybe ten percent are anything I had consider putting on the internet for eternity.

I am still not where I would like to be ideally with making beats – it is something I think I will continue to work at for the foreseeable future. There is a tangible difference between the best of what I was making at the beginning of the school year and what I am producing now, though. It is easy for me to focus on what is lacking in my current beats, but when I think about the progress I have made I am proud of where I am at.

One of my early beats:

<https://soundcloud.com/isakmadeit/007-unfinished-loop>

Current work:

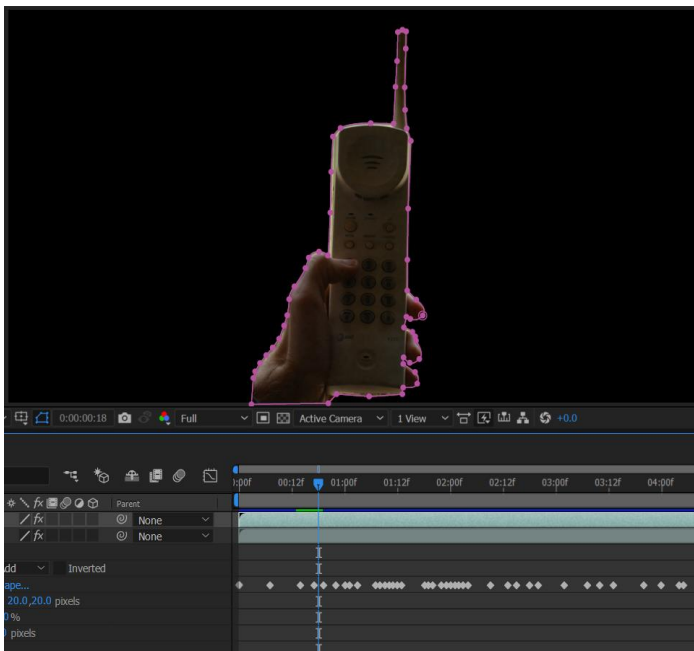
<https://soundcloud.com/isakmadeit/harder-than-vince-carters-knee-cartilage-is>

In comparing these two, observe how the first beat is almost entirely sample based. I still like it, and think that it was solid work. However, the amount of drum programming and general instrumentation in the second beat is much more complex. The second beat also has far better mixing. Listening through good headphones, the first beat has several points where audio “clips.” It is also much more difficult to determine which instrument is which and pick them out individually. The second beat has decent mixing - and more than twice as many instruments used.

Getting a handle on mixing and mastering was one of my biggest accomplishments with this project. Using methods such as sidechain compression, I learned how to make the volume of one instrument correspond with the volume of another. This allows two instruments in similar frequencies to play simultaneously without clashing or causing the volume to be too high. Learning to apply these techniques took experimentation and practice.

I had a passable grasp of Ableton when starting this project, but I had never used Adobe After Effects before. I may have underestimated the complexity of the program. My previous video editing experience was mostly in Final Cut X, a piece of Apple software designed to be as user friendly as possible. This was definitely better than starting with no experience at all, but I had really only seen the figurative tip of the iceberg as far as what could be done with video editing.

After Effects is essentially Photoshop, but for editing video in. This simplistic explanation makes it sound like it an easy transition from one to the other. It is important



to consider how much more complex video can be than still imagery. For every second of video, you are dealing with 24-30 photos. That means to remove something in post production, every second an object needs to be masked

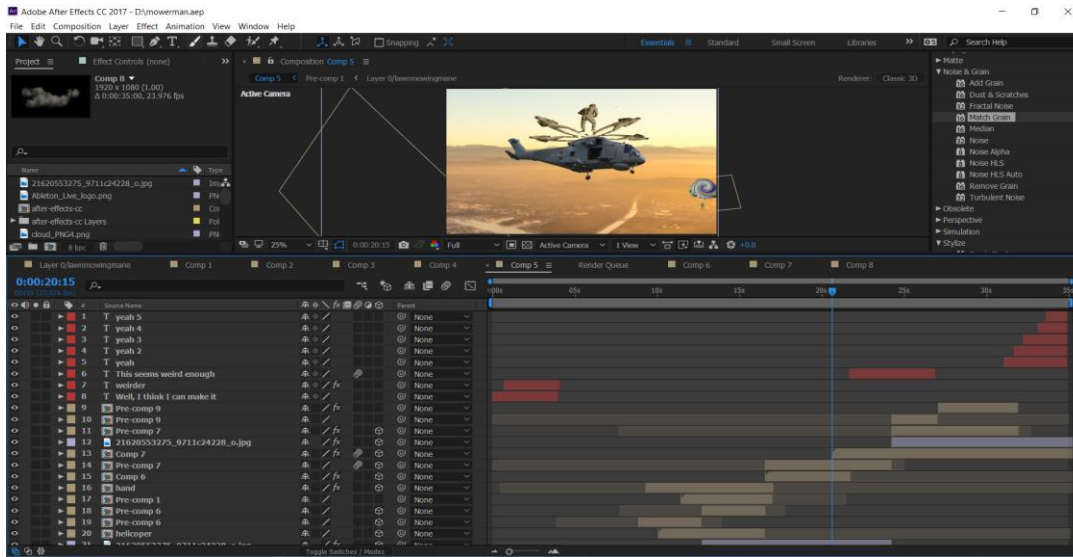
(cut out) involves changing up to 30 pictures. Figure 1 shows what one second of a mask might look like.

Figure 1: Each pink point represents a point that is adjusted to fit the mask, while the diamond shapes below show *when* each point has been shifted (a keyframe). As you can see, there have been about 30 keyframes in the first few seconds of footage.

Of course, there is much more to After Effects than simple masking. Per the name, applying effects to videos is a huge part of the program. From blurs, to stylistic choices, to color correction, it is a very flexible program. Essentially, the main limit to the capabilities of After Effects is how much time one is willing to invest and creativity. The time investment is the real limiting factor, at least for me. To do a really good job with complex animations, the ratio of hours spent working to actual project length is pretty crazy. For a one minute video, I would estimate I spent at least 15 hours working just within After Effects. That is about a 900:1 ratio of editing time to run time.

Granted, I am still an amateur, and much of the time I invested was into initially learning how to do the work not just the editing process. With experience comes speed, precision, and efficiency. That said this whole project has given me a much greater appreciation for the time and effort that goes into so much of the content I consume. Based on some quick research, it seems like my ratio of editing time to actual run time is not far from what a big budget movie would have, if not lower. There is a reason Hollywood movies cost hundreds of million dollars.

To give a better explanation of what I did (and as part of an internship application) I produced [this one minute video](#). It is a short overview of the process, so I will share a few screenshots of the actual project files



A screenshot of one scene - this shows about half the layers utilized. Each file labeled “pre comp” is actually a folder of two or more layers that has been pre composed to save on rendering time & simplify the project.

Despite the relatively significant time commitment of editing in After Effects, I have also found it to be one of the most rewarding programs I have used. It has been empowering to realize that many of the ideas for videos that had been stuck in my head can now be made a reality. It has also made me realize I might be interested in a career in this field.

I have already written about underestimating the complexity of Ableton and After Effects - “I underestimated it” could be the thesis statement of this thesis. Constructing videos with a logical flow and narrative was another element I had not put enough thought into previous to starting this project. I had some basic ideas. I wanted to edit some nice shots of nature. I wanted to make content that was funny. And I knew that whatever I made had to appeal to unique demographic. Putting all of this together cohesively proved to be quite a task, and is something I am still working at.

As it turns out, cool ideas for a single shot or a few seconds of a video are not enough to make several minutes worth of content. It seems like an obvious revelation, but it is not something I realized until I started editing and reviewing what I had made. I will share an early example of this realization.

<https://vimeo.com/214093724>

This was the first project longer than five seconds or so that I made in After Effects. The concept initially was simply that I wanted to deconstruct images into their parts. I still maintain that this is an interesting idea. However, stretching it into a two minute video requires some type of narrative, which I thought was lacking. I settled on relating it loosely to social media, but never managed to create what I would view as really solid work. The visuals were pretty cool at points, and looking back I think I was challenging myself just with the amount of After Effects work required. In the end, I chose not to put this video out. The amount of time required to bring it up to what my standards are now was too great.

With the work I have created since, I have placed a much greater emphasis on the context and meaning of what I am creating. That is not to say I have mastered it. Creating something from scratch without being too derivative is a difficult task. However, I think I have figured out a few better ways of approaching the issue.

A key realization was that I should be thinking about the audio and video sections of my project as a whole, rather than two separate parts. Videos should be influenced and paced to make sense with the audio. Just as audio influences the video, it is a circular process. I have found myself making a song, working on a video, then going back and modifying the audio to better fit the video. Doing this creates a more cohesive final

product. It also blurs the line between whether I am making videos for music, or music for videos. For me, both are equally important - I value both my auditory and visual senses highly!

The second realization I had was that I should adapt my content to fit the market. By making videos and music within an existing “scene” or subculture, I would already have an audience interested in what I was creating, and many more avenues to market it through. For example, one of my videos is a scene from an iconic Japanese animated movie *Kiki's Delivery Service*, but cut to be weirder, fit the tone of my music, and be full of special effects. As it happens, there is already a pretty significant following for these movies. By creating content that connects my music with something already popular, the audience for what I've made grows immensely.

Another example is a video I am still working on featuring local weatherman Mark Schnackenberg. Affectionately known as “The Schnack” to locals, everybody seems to know him, or have a story regarding him. The idea of local celebrity fascinates me, and I wanted to explore what “The Schnack” represents to me. With video from one of Schnack's nightly forecasts, I decided to edit it to be as bizarre as possible. One of the recurring themes of this project has been making video dreamy and surreal. For “The Schnack”, this means having him give a forecast for the future, create rainbows onscreen, and even appear to play some of the instruments used in the beat.

Developing video concepts and marketing have been closely related for me. As the marketing stage has stretched beyond the scope of this semester, creating concepts that are marketable has really been what I have focused on. Most the marketing tactics

that I have utilized and will utilize center around finding a unique subculture online, creating content that I think would do well within it, and then posting that content.

With my previously mentioned *Kiki's Delivery Service* video, there are a wide variety of “aesthetic” pages across Facebook, Tumblr, and Reddit I have chosen to market towards. These pages might post anime, Japanese culture, instrumental hip-hop, or a combination of all those categories. A simple repost from one of these pages could potentially earn thousands of impressions, despite the content having little mainstream appeal. The idea is, there are lots of niche communities that when combined add up to a large audience. By combining these interests and mixing and matching them in unexpected ways, weird content has a chance to flourish.

Another interesting tactic I utilized was “meta” appeal with my *Weirdest Internship Application Ever* video. This video was essentially a look inside the creative process, and my mind. By making the video more of a conversation with the viewer than simply something placed in front of them, they are more inclined to keep watching, waiting for the big reveal. The first half of the video contains very minimal imagery, instead relying on copy and subtle animation that fits with the beat. The second half takes one image and recontextualizes it in as weird a way as I could think of.

A third approach that I utilized with my *Schnack* video was to attempt to generate local interest. The idea is to get some real life buzz in addition to online buzz. When I put it out, I will be testing whether generating content on a local level or for the web is more effective. My tentative hypothesis is that local interest will give an initial view advantage, but fewer views long term. I believe that content made more specifically to appeal to

online communities has a longer lifespan due to how much more spread out people are, and the fact that it is not dependent on local cultural references.

The final approach I am going to utilize is a literal approach to making a music video. By literal, I mean the video will visually represent all the sounds happening in the song. When there is a drum sound, an image of the specific waveform appears. For claps, actual hands clapping will appear onscreen - and so on. This has some marketing potential in a few ways. I believe this type of video satiates some of the curiosity about where the noises used in electronic music come from. Many listeners would be surprised by the sample sources of some of their favorite songs. It also allows for a video closely linked with audio - every sound has a counterpart in the video. It's visually interesting to have what one is hearing correspond exactly with what one sees. That is the whole reason live concerts are so appealing!

With the formal academic portion of this project completed, some critique and reflection is important. I think some aspects of this project went really well, and some turned out less impressive than I had hoped. I am very satisfied that I went from never having opened a program to producing some relatively high quality work in it over the course of a semester or so. I think the growth in my After Effects skillset has been one of the most impressive aspects of this project. I also improved my technical skills mixing, mastering, and composing. On the marketing and advertising side of the project, I gained some valuable insights into future marketing tactics and subcultures to market to.

Of course, I also uncovered many areas in which I need improvement. My communication skills were lacking, especially at the beginning of the project. I also succumbed to procrastination far too often, finding myself sprinting to catch up to where

I should have been multiple times. Finally, I bit off more than I could chew, and really could have benefitted from narrowing my project's focus. This is something that I somewhat knew when I started the project, and did not spend enough time considering. On the whole, although my final product is not perfect, it clearly shows growth and development. Despite setbacks, I put a great deal of time into this work. I would view this project as more of a beginning than an ending for me.