Cheats, Thieves and 'the Kids': Electronic Dance Music and Technological Change

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Abstract

Over the past two decades, electronic dance music (EDM) has shifted away from being primarily a vinyl-based culture due to the adoption of new technologies for production and performance. Whilst enabling new creative possibilities for musicians, these technologies have also disrupted existing norms within EDM culture. Audiences reacted with unease to the initial use of laptops as an instrument for performance. The Internet and DJ software lowered the entry barriers for potential DJ-producers whilst raising new issues of musical ownership. This paper examines how these disruptions have been perceived by EDM practitioners through an ethnographic account of DJ-producers from various electronic music scenes in Melbourne, Australia. Drawing on Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital and its subsequent readings (in particular Thornton's concept of subcultural capital) the idea is further developed with a focus on the role of technology (referred to as 'techno-cultural capital'). This reading of cultural capital is then used to analyse how participants articulate notions of authenticity, creativity and success in a changing technological milieu. Three major themes are explored. First, the accusation of 'cheating', described as using any technology that removes the fundamental skill of beatmatching from the DJ performance. Second, the issue of 'stealing' described as the unauthorised use of parts of another DJ's composition or performance. Third, the other-ing of youth associated with inexperience using vinyl, cheating and a lack of social capital. This paper concludes with a discussion of how techno-cultural capital may be transformed into economic capital.

Keywords: cultural capital, subcultural capital, electronic dance music, DJ

Introduction

Within various electronic dance music (EDM) scenes, there are tensions concerning shifts in technology. This is reflected in the recent literature concerning DJ culture and new technologies (Cascone, 2002; Turner, 2003; Farrugia & Swiss, 2005; Montano, 2008; 2010). This is often manifested as concerns about a disruption to existing standards and practices caused by new technologies. The depth of this body of literature is currently limited. However as Montano (2010: 415) concluded, "as clubbers witness more and more DJs employing technology other than vinyl and turntables, …their understandings and perceptions of what it means to be a DJ will change, and this may require a redefinition of the concept of DJing". This research area is set to expand as practices and norms in the field shift, bringing with it the need to conceptualise such technological shifts. This paper therefore offers a modest contribution toward this end.

I begin by reviewing Bourdieu's (1984) notion of cultural capital and its subsequent developments, before I develop my own iteration, referring to it as techno-cultural capital. Some methodological considerations are then discussed concerning my compiled ethnographic accounts. This lays out the remaining sections of the paper manifested as recurring themes in the interviews that comprise my ethnography. First I consider the theme of 'cheating' often attributed to the use of the sync function on software packages. Second I consider the theme of 'stealing' often described as 'lifting' parts of others' sets and samples without permission. The third theme concerns 'the kids', constructed as the constant other by more established DJs. Finally an important issue that is implicit in this analysis is the attainment of economic success. I conclude the paper speculating how techno-cultural and other kinds of capital convert into economic capital and the implications of the three aforementioned themes.

Updating Cultural Capital

Bourdieu (1984) established, among other things, the link between taste and class. The often cited maxim in his introduction "taste classifies and classifies the classifier" captures the essence of the idea (Bourdieu, 1984: 6). Class identity is associated not only with economic capital but also what Bourdieu (1986: 47) termed 'cultural capital', defined as a type of capital "which is convertible, on certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications". In other words it refers to a type of capital based on factors such as skills, knowledge and level of formal education, your personal tastes being an indicator of cultural capital and class. Thornton (1995) applied and updated the idea in her study of club cultures to develop her notion of 'subcultural capital'. She combined a depoliticised approach to subcultures and the organising logic of cultural capital to explain what she found in her ethnography of UK club and rave culture. Thornton moved away from class conflict and instead explored subcultures in terms of a set of distinctions: authentic and inauthentic; hip and mainstream; underground and media. The antagonism in this case was between those who were part of the hip, underground subculture and wanted to avoid the 'pervasive' mainstream. The notion of subcultural capital for Thornton (1995: 11) thus has a differentiating function as a form of capital that "confers status on its owner in the eyes of the relevant beholder" and one that can be embodied through having the right clothes, owning the right records and knowing

the slang. Bryson (1996) took up the idea of cultural capital and applied it as multicultural capital. In this particular paper multicultural capital referred to cultural tolerance. It is also from Bryson's paper that I have borrowed the term 'techno-cultural capital' to use as a modest analytical tool.

On one level, techno-cultural capital can be understood as being attained through one's ability or skills to use a particular technological device and the intensity of that skill so in other words how competently one uses the device. It involves the characteristics of the device in addition to the abilities of the individual. In this sense 'techno-cultural capital' is a term that can be used interchangeably with terms such as 'skill' or 'ability'. For example, the first time I saw a CDJ, I understood it to be a somewhat elaborate portable CD player until a friend explained how DJs use it to perform. The characteristics of the CDJ offered the possibilities of such use as a performance instrument but I did not have the ability or knowledge to see this. Therefore I would lack techno-cultural capital. However if the device was a piano, due to the many years I spent learning how to play I would be able to competently play the instrument. So in this instance I would embody some techno-cultural capital. The examples here show how techno-cultural capital relates to the level of the individual. However this is not especially useful. I can tell myself that I possess great skill with a device (techno-cultural capital) in the same way that I can tell myself that I am cool or hip (subcultural capital). But this means very little because types of cultural capital (such as subcultural capital, multicultural capital and techno-cultural capital) are socially defined and relative terms. So I have to discuss techno-cultural capital on a social level. On this level, techno-cultural capital has a kind of exclusionary social function. It would operate in the same manner as Thornton's (1995) subcultural capital where distinctions are made between those who are 'underground' and 'cool' and those who are 'mainstream' and 'lame'. Similar distinctions are made by EDM DJ-producers and often these relate to technological practices.

Bourdieu (1986) further explained cultural capital as existing in terms of three forms or states: embodied, objectified and institutionalised. Techno-cultural capital can also be manifested in these ways. First in an embodied state, techno-cultural capital could be demonstrated through the actual displays of skill with the piece of technology. Traditionally for DJs this is how well someone can perform with vinyl and turntables. Objectified techno-cultural capital would be the ownership of objects that indicate an ability to use the technology well. So for DJs this could mean owning a good selection of music and knowing when to play the right tracks to get people dancing. So in other words, reading the crowd and knowing where to source one's music. Finally the institutionalised form of techno-cultural capital could be something like qualifications attained at any institution that offer practical training. There are now courses that are offer such training for DJing and music production.

Research Method

In terms of methodology, this paper draws on an ethnographic approach. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with a small sample of eight DJ-producers based around Melbourne, Australia. They range from being full-time professionals who run their own record labels and club nights to amateurs who do not perform regularly. The main aim was to obtain some detailed accounts of how DJ-producers

were actually using particular technologies and why they made particular choices rather than obtain a large generalisable survey of statistical data. Most of the data collection started as one-on-one semi-structured interviews with participants. However in many cases this ended up being an entire evening or day so there is an element of participant observation. The DJ-producers would go through a normal day whilst answering my questions in addition to demonstrating and explaining their work. At times there would be interruptions, breaks, visits from their friends and so forth. I should also note that unlike many researchers in this field, I am not a DJ nor do I go clubbing often. As an outsider I did some basic research about DJing to begin with but I was relying on my participants to explain in their own terms their musical practices and the scenes they were involved in.

Cheating

Traditionally the craft of DJing is associated with turntables. The idea is to play a series of songs over the evening in a seamless mix. The aim is to have no interruption between songs and therefore no interruption to those on the dance floor. This is known as beatmatching and it is considered one of the fundamental skills of DJing. According to Brewster and Broughton (2000), the convention was established in the late 1960s. A certain level of skill, timing and practice is required to ensure that the transition between songs is smooth (i.e. that the beats are matched) – particularly with the fast pace of EDM. However in more recent times, DJ software tends to include a function (known as the synch function) to automate this process. Thus there is an accusation of cheating leveled against those who use this function.

Cheating could be described as achieving something through some means of deception without the necessary skills or knowledge – such as cheating in a test at school. This theme was one of the more immediately obvious in the interviews. It had been explained in mostly similar terms by a few different interviewees. I first heard about it from a younger DJ, who described himself as an amateur DJ-producer. He referred to cheating in passing when describing the circumstances in which he received his first residency from a club organiser:

> He doesn't know whether I can DJ or not. I could be one that plays my laptop and cheats and auto-beat [pauses] you know, beatmatching with applications like Traktor. Doesn't matter if you miss the button, miss it by like a split second, it'll match it. A lot of people do that and cheat. That's why I think nah, they're not that good. (Interview, July, 2011)

Another more established DJ made a similar claim: "If you're an international DJ, you can get ten grand to play a show. You can do your set on your computer on the plane over here, have it all ready to go for an hour and a half, plug your laptop into the mixer and just stand there" (Interview, August, 2011). Here there is the expectation that manually beatmatching is a required skill and indicator of embodied techno-cultural capital in their respective scenes. Cheating bypasses this necessary skill display with an easier route, thus a lack of techno-cultural capital is evident. A full time DJ (who holds a number of residencies), explicitly confirmed the expectation:

…those programs that are used while playing live, they beatmatch everything for you. So you take the art of doing things with your hands and putting tracks together at the right place at the right time, that's all gone. So I can understand some people might like vinyls better, some like CDs, that's all fine. The mixing is still the same, you still have to do some sort of beatmatching to get it right. When you're using laptops and stuff like that it's totally different. That's when everything's half done for you and all you're really worried about is track selections… I definitely think it's cheating. (Interview, August, 2011)

Stealing

In the simplest sense, stealing is taking something that does not belong to you. For my interviewees, this was explained to me in two ways. First, concerning production, it is the unauthorised use of a sample from someone's track. When I asked an experienced DJ to explain the issue, he expressed his disapproval:

It's a pet hate. A lot of people do it and us as DJs and producers notice those little intricate bits of songs. So someone will lift like a drum kick or a snare, clap and we'll go 'hey, that's from that song'. Automatically you lose respect for that person it's over, he's shit [pauses] you don't do that you know what I mean? Unless you credit their name on the remix. You know like if you lifted a pretty obvious sample from a song, unless you put that name on the remix… you're an idiot. (Interview, August, 2011)

As this DJ pointed out, those who have objectified techno-cultural capital will be able to identify if a sample has been stolen even if it is a single unit. Their objectification of techno-cultural capital is seen through the possession of an extensive collection of songs which would include what their peers produce and what is currently in vogue within their scene. They have such a familiarity with this collection that they can identify these intricate parts of songs and how they are crafted together. The thief on the other hand does not and either assumes that the lifted parts will not be noticed or they do it anyway as a short cut. So when caught, the thief's objectified techno-cultural capital is depleted. This may also indirectly convert into a loss of economic capital as it becomes known in the scene that a particular DJ is a thief and if the scene was known to vilify such acts. The nature of the Internet has made it easier to acquire music and in this instance it may not only be consumed but also used in production. This kind of stealing is widespread but the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable is marked by permission for use. The permission in question can be viewed as a professional courtesy with potential social capital whereas the consequences include the possible indirect loss of economic capital and isolation from the scene.

The second category of stealing is on the level of performance and is more subtle as a younger amateur DJ recounted an experience with a more established peer:

If you happen to have a guest DJ perform live on the radio show and they've tended to use the same set, the exact same set to a *T* that you've done previously, I'm against that and we actually have heard that... I've heard it before on Nova Nation and wasn't impressed, was *not*

impressed… It disappoints me because it's like well look at the position you're in. You've got such a high profile, everyone knows who you are, everyone listens to your music, yet you can't be original. (Interview, July, 2011)

This is said to be a big issue among DJs. Part of their appeal stems from their song choices, how they choose what song to play and when during a night. Part of the challenge is about creating a unique aural aesthetic. So in this instance, the aesthetic is being emulated with no reference to the one who recomposed the original setlist; hence the element of deceit and fraud in passing off someone's taste in sound as your own. It could be seen as appropriating another's techno-cultural capital, the indicator of their labour of recomposition.

'The Kids'

The phrase 'the kids' was something that came up often and usually in passing but there was also a sense of hostility associated with this reference. There was a perceived image of a young inexperienced DJ-producer, in essence, someone that lacks techno-cultural capital, the ability to use vinyl and CDJs. In the context of a question comparing vinyl and digital, an established DJ reflected:

Well that's the argument isn't it? It's always better if it's older. It was always better. It *was* always better, you know what I mean? Everything's always *was* better. This is what happens when you're older. Like even now I'm twenty-two and I think that I've got this real hatred towards the younger kids because I just don't like them because we did it better. It's just the way it is. It's just our human mind. (Interview, August, 2011)

Club culture was located within spaces for youth in much the same way as subcultures in the traditional UK cultural studies framework – beyond the "tyranny of the home" (Gelder, 2007; Thornton, 1995: 18). More recently, connections have been made between significant innovations and youth culture's experimentation which includes the domain of remix culture in addition to roots in DiY punk, piracy (pirate radio to the Pirate Bay), Street Art, Hip Hop and so forth (Mason, 2008). This could be read as attributing much embodied techno-cultural capital to the youths who are the source of fruitful interactions with technologies. Thus it is interesting the often hostile comments directed at 'the kids' though this became clearer later due to an economic motive. One DJ explained his reluctance release more of his own tracks feeling that it would not be noticed due to "a lot of fucking kids, they're just making rubbish and no one holds it in any high regard whatsoever" (Interview, August, 2011). So 'the kids' in their inexperience flood the EDM scenes with low quality tracks. This inexperience in skill level and lack of techno-cultural capital in relation to respected technologies such as the vinyl is often highlighted by interviewees when discussing 'the kids'. Describing a typical set, the inexperience of 'the kids' is again mentioned:

You'd start of playing the back of the other DJ's set. He plays a song that you play into. I always typically like to play a single sort of genre to that. Sort of lead into it. Because I don't really like it how people, kids (I say kids like the young ones tend to do it a lot) come on and just straight away out of the blocks just try to make an impression. You really notice that

there's a difference in the two DJs and I don't like that. Because we're not here to compete anyway… but a lot of the kids do. (Interview, August, 2011)

'The kids' are also accused of the earlier charges of stealing, cheating and other discrediting acts. It was implied that the earlier excerpts concerning cheating were aimed at 'the kids'.

From Techno-Cultural to Economic Capital: Discussion

The mechanisms behind commercial success and fame in EDM scenes are complex. In the past, the initial costs were high, restricting DJing to the very dedicated. Langlois (1992) listed the equipment and prices from the early days of the UK house scene though suggested if you could manage the initial capital required, then the ongoing costs could be managed as DJs have the advantage of being self-sufficient. As in many other contexts, technological advances have lowered the costs and hence the financial barriers of entry are significantly diminished – one can simply download a pirated version of a popular software package and begin as 'bedroom' producers. Due to this relative ease, there is no shortage of DJs and producers hence leading to more intense competition for spots at events and residencies at clubs. Reputation becomes crucial for "the kids" as a specific manifestation of social capital. As one DJ explained:

> The best example is the Inthemix votes. They're on at the moment. It's a poll for the best DJ, best live act, best producer and stuff and you see these kids everywhere, putting 'vote for me, vote for me, vote for me'. If you're good enough, people will vote for you anyway. You don't need to push it on people. That's the way I look at it. (Interview, August, 2011)

Thornton (1995) noted that while subcultural capital did not convert to economic capital as easily, some individuals make a living from theirs including DJs. Techno-cultural capital may reflect this logic but the financial reward may be lowered so one may sacrifice techno-cultural capital for financial gain. One DJ indicated this when I asked what he preferred to use when performing: "CDs, a lot easier. But reputation-wise and I suppose more enjoyment-wise, I'd choose records but it's a lot of effort. And I suppose this mindset I've got now, you're still getting paid the same" (Interview, August, 2011).

It could be assumed that having flexible skills to use vinyl, CDJs and laptops would pay off for DJs. In a sense it could be embodied techno-cultural capital converting into economic capital. However an established DJ provided an account of what he views as becoming more common:

> So a lot of the times you find that promoters or people who run parties, their main thing is to get people through the door, to get people into the place. When they get approached by these young kids who go 'listen, I made a track, can I play at your party?' or something like that. They go 'what can you bring to the table?' They [the kids] go 'I can bring 10 or 15 people to your party' so straight away they go 'aw yeah, 15, 20 people, that's an extra bit of money for me' and it means the place is a bit more

packed. Four, five, six years ago, the only people who stood behind the decks and were playing were actually proper DJs. (Interview, August, 2011)

In this instance, 'the kids' are able to get a spot due solely to their social capital which for an event organizer means more earnings for the evening – in addition to having to pay less compared with a professional. Can techno-cultural capital convert to social capital? I can only speculate that it would despite unexpected outcomes such as organisers focused only on the bottom line preferring inexperienced DJs who can bring large numbers of friends to the event.

Whether audiences are aware or care about what a DJ uses to perform is an area to explore in more detail for future research – would a DJ command the respect of audiences despite receiving none from his or her peers? Broadly speaking, new DJs - 'the kids' - need to build an audience and keep them content in order to secure more gigs. The more established career-minded DJ recognises the need to maintain their status among their peers and also keep audiences content in order to continue getting paid. This requires a constant negotiation of changing practices, technology and the associated notions of authenticity and credibility within EDM scenes. Only then can they progress far enough to become an established name and be afforded and succeed with opportunities such as event organising - a position that often would require the accumulation of economic, social and different types of cultural capital. Thus there is a complex relationship between economic, social and techno-cultural capital. Conventions surrounding the practices of cheating, stealing and the other-ing of youth and inexperience by established players become part of this dynamic.

Conclusion

What this paper has aimed to do is provide an analysis of technological changes within EDM and explore this through the views of a number of DJ-producers. To this end it has outlined an update to Bourdieu's (1986) notion of cultural capital (techno-cultural capital) for use as a modest analytical tool to examine its small ethnographic sample. Specific instances of the tensions surrounding technological changes and EDM scenes are discussed through three themes considered controversial by DJ-producers: cheating, stealing and 'the kids'. These are considered by established DJs as a disruption to existing skills and conventions and complicate existing dynamics of converting types of cultural capital into economic capital.

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