

8-Bit Music on Twitch: How the Chiptune Scene Thrived During the Pandemic

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COVID-19 had a catastrophic impact on the entertainment business, leaving thousands of successful musicians unemployed. In 2020 and 2021, global lockdowns meant that live performances were largely replaced with online live-streaming. This article assesses the state of chiptune live music during the pandemic. The argument is made that the chiptune scene is well equipped to thrive online, as it is a movement closely related to gaming and technological innovation. In order to assess the advantages and disadvantages of streaming gigs for the chiptune genre, an autoethnographic case study is combined with a questionnaire, where performer experiences of streamed events are analysed within Csikszentmihalyi's "systems model of creativity" (1988, 1999). Section 1 provides more detail of the chiptune genre. Section 2 is an overview over the state of the art of live streaming in general. In section 3, the "systems model of creativity" framework is introduced, and section 4 summarizes the questionnaire and case study. Section 5 concludes.

1 Chiptune: Nostalgia and Hardware Hacking as Artistic Practice

Chiptune is a lo-fi electronic music style that emerged in the early 70s and 80s. Since existing audio playback formats were not suitable for interactive real-time audio applications, special chips were built that could transform electrical impulses from a computer into analogue sound waves. Musicians and programmers developed code for these chips, allowing arcade machines, early games consoles and personal computers to be transformed into musical instruments. The unique sonic characteristics of these sound chips set the scene for the iconic 8-bit sound, which continues to inspire musicians in the present day (McAlpine 2018). Traditionally, sound chips were controlled with tracker software, a method that some purists still employ in the present day. These musicians enjoy the intellectual challenge and creative restriction of working directly with obsolete technology. Among them, hardware hacking is popular (Farrell 2020), and fosters a strong DIY ethic and mutual curiosity. Non-purists expand the chiptune aesthetic into modern music genres ranging from pop and EDM to rock, using chiptune software emulations within a standard DAW workflow to achieve the typical timbres and arpeggiation found in older 8-bit tunes (Paul 2014).



