University of Glasgow

Articulations of Inclusivity Within In-game Concerts: A Comparative Multi-case Study

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MRes Creativity, Inclusivity and the Virtual – 2022/2023

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Research

School of Culture and Creative Arts

College of Arts

University of Glasgow

September 2023

Abstract

This research will investigate the power of in-game concerts to act as articulators of social connections and inclusivity between their attendees. Despite existing as a category of music consumption since the 2000s, with platforms such as *Second Life* and *Lord of the Rings Online*, in-game concerts have entered a new stage in their development and popularity since 2018, with more platforms and artists adhering to (and further developing) the format. This often causes thousands, or millions, of attendees to be simultaneously impacted by a same virtual event and leads to the research questions: (i) *in what ways can in-game concerts affect the social experience of music consumption of their attendees* and (ii) *in what ways can in-game concerts be more (or less) inclusive than their non-virtual counterparts*? By combining elements from the theory of Liveness, with special attention to the notion of 'social liveness' (Auslander, 2008; Couldry, 2004), Social Inclusion Theory (Bailey, 2005; Hayday & Collison, 2020) and Social Dominance Theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Ong et al., 2021), this research will be carried out as a comparative multi-case study. Special focus will be given to the scene of independent *Minecraft* festivals (2018-2021) and to the concert by Norwegian singer Aurora in the MMORPG *Sky: Children of the Light* (2022). The investigation of each of these cases will lead to a comparative analysis, from which reflections on the social power of in-game concerts as a wider category will be drawn.

Key-words*:* *in-game concerts; inclusivity; social inclusion; virtuality; social liveness*

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Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Baillie Gifford, who made this research possible by granting me the Creativity, Inclusivity and the Virtual research scholarship.

Thanks to my supervisors, Matt Brennan and Tim Peacock, for their invaluable knowledge and guidance.

Thanks to the colleagues in academia who have helped me refine the thoughts and reflections contained in this dissertation, especially Arthur Ellinger and Karina Moritzen.

Thanks to my friend Eduardo Diniz, for his continuous advice and support throughout this project.

Thanks to my mother Maria Inês, for her unconditional love and for being my ultimate role model.

Thanks to my partner Mariana, for her love, patience, and for sharing every bit of this journey with me.

1. Introduction

This dissertation will be dedicated to studying the phenomenon of in-game music concerts from a social perspective. By critically analysing the development of these virtual events over the past five years and drawing a comparative multi-case study of two crucial instances in their history, it will seek to understand the power of in-game concerts as articulators of inclusivity and sociability between attendees.

The phenomenon of concerts held within online videogames is not a new one. For instance, Cheng's (2014) account of a player-driven music scene within the MMORPG *Lord of the Rings Online* shows that it traces to as far back as the game's release in 2007, while Kent & Ellis (2015) show that since at least 2006 there have been virtual clubs in *Second Life* dedicated to promoting shared musical experiences between users. Both examples, however, reflect scenarios where participants of these virtual worlds were given access to features which allowed them to share music (often created or executed by themselves) with a limited number of other users. Thus, in these instances, in-game music performance became a special feature of player-to-player interaction and very limited in terms of how many people it could reach simultaneously: Gagen & Cook (2016) indicate that performances in *Second Life* rarely exceeded 40 simultaneous listeners. Therefore, while the acknowledgement of examples such as *Lord of the Rings Online* and *Second Life* is crucial to this project, it must also be recognised that the current state of in-game concerts represents a huge departure from the logic represented by these two platforms, due to factors that will be presented below.

It could be argued that in-game concerts have entered a new stage in their development from the late 2010s. This was heralded by the establishment of Open Pit (previously known as Thwip Gang), an independent collective which ran fundraising music festivals in *Minecraft* from 2018 to 2020, to be discussed in depth in Chapter 4. While the experiences promoted by Open Pit still technically counted as entirely player-to-player (given that Open Pit's crew was itself constituted by *Minecraft* players), they also represented a big leap, in terms of scale and structure, from the reality represented by its predecessors: Open Pit's first festival, Coalchella (held in September 2018) had around 2,600 virtual attendees and over 40 artists performing, including chiptune indie band Anamanaguchi, who by the time were already long consolidated (Park, 2018).

This new phase in the evolution of in-game concerts was, however, christened by the Marshmello concert held in *Fortnite*, in February 2019. Unlike independent events such as Open Pit's, this one emerged from a direct collaboration between the artist and the platform and was offered to players as an official feature of the game (Statt, 2019). This new paradigm translated into a very finely produced virtual concert (including, among other features, the use of motion capture for the animation of the artist's in-game avatar), which managed to attract 10.7 million attendees over its two days of duration (Webster, 2019). Thus,

Marshmello's concert marked the breakthrough of in-game concerts into the mainstream, as well as a steep verticalization in the relationship between those who produce these events and those who attend them.

Since Marshmello's concert, over 70 other concerts were held across at least nine different virtual platforms: Appendix A provides a list detailing all that could be found between September 2018 and June 2023. It is true that *Fortnite* has stayed extremely relevant to the scenario, by hosting concerts which topped Marshmello's numbers by a huge margin, such as Travis Scott's Astronomical (which had over 27 million attendees in April 2020, see: Webster, 2020) and Ariana Grande's Rift Tour (which achieved 78 million attendees in September 2021, see: Wickes, 2021), both of which are still highly regarded as peak technological and artistic achievements in this front. Over this period, however, the scenario for in-game concerts began to be populated by several other platforms. In 2019 and 2020, the medieval-themed MMORPG *AdventureQuest3D* hosted a series of heavy rock concerts, featuring bands such as Korn and Alice In Chains (Zwiezen, 2019). In mid-2022, the shooting-based games *PUBG* and *Garena Free Fire* became the first exclusively mobile platforms to feature in-game concerts, by hosting experiences led by Blackpink and Justin Bieber, respectively (Ombler, 2022-a; Ombler, 2022-b). Towards the end of 2022, *Sky: Children of the Light* presented a concert by Norwegian singer Aurora, which broke ground by drastically increasing the number of simultaneous participants seen in in-game concerts up to that point: it allowed for virtual crowds of up to 4,000 players (Chen, 2022-b). And in 2020, the construction-based gaming platform *Roblox* began its trajectory towards leadership of the scenario of in-game concerts. Not only it was able to show a scale comparable to *Fortnite*'s main concerts (for example, through a Lil Nas X concert which gathered 33 million attendees in November 2020, see: Kastrenakes, 2020), it also soon became the record-holding platform in terms of the sheer number of in-game concerts held: as of the writing of this dissertation, *Roblox* has hosted at least 34 different in-game concerts, whereas *Fortnite*, having joined this contest over 18 months earlier, comes in second place, with 27 concerts (see: Appendix A). It must also be noted that, from September 2022, *Fortnite* and *Roblox* both debuted virtual spaces named *iHeartLand*, in partnership with iHeartRadio. Despite being different platforms, because the space is controlled by the same company, every in-game concert produced by iHeartRadio becomes available in both video games.

Some crucial characteristics can be highlighted regarding this current stage of the development of in-game concerts. The first is that (with rare exceptions, such as the bulk of the artists featured in Open Pit's festivals in *Minecraft*) the vast majority of the artists featured in these 70-plus concerts are at the very least flirting with the mainstream: for example, very few of them stay under the mark of 1 million monthly listeners on Spotify, with several actually surpassing the marks of 10, 20, 30 million and beyond. This is a clear indicator that this scenario is mostly dominated by corporate relationships, in which artists are required to have very high capital to be allowed in, which automatically indicates a departure from the independent landscape represented by *Second Life*, *Lord of the Rings Online* and (to some extent) *Minecraft*. And

second, the numbers of attendees these virtual concerts can achieve seem to consistently be able to surpass, by huge margins, the numbers normally expected from traditional, in-person live music experiences: for instance, Aurora's concert in *Sky: Children of the Light* managed to attract 1.6 million concurrent attendees at its launch (Chen, 2022-b). While this number seems to be severely overshadowed by the ones reached by Travis Scott or Ariana Grande, it still represents several times the capacity of the largest concert arenas in the world. The crucial point here is that, as of 2023, in-game concerts do not only prioritize artists capable of attracting huge crowds, but their current technological state allows them to collectively affect millions of people simultaneously.

At this point, it must be made very clear that in-game concerts vary greatly in terms of how they are organised and presented to the audience. There are three basic forms that can be highlighted from the examples listed in Appendix A. The first involves the artists controlling their avatars in real time, allowing for some degree of direct interaction with attendees as the concert unfolds, normally with pre-recorded music playing in the background: concerts in *Minecraft*, such as Open Pit's, adopt this method (see: Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1: screenshot of a *Minecraft* festival with 100 gec's Laura Les' avatar being controlled in real time (Image credits: u/ramunesodas; Reddit)

The second, and perhaps most popular, is based on avatars and animations of the artists being programmed to pre-recorded music, allowing for very intricate visual effects at the cost of the direct interaction between artists and attendees: all the biggest in-game concerts, such as Travis Scott's, Ariana Grande's and Lil Nas X's, as well as Aurora's concert in *Sky: Children of the Light*, were built according to this model (see: Figure 1.2).

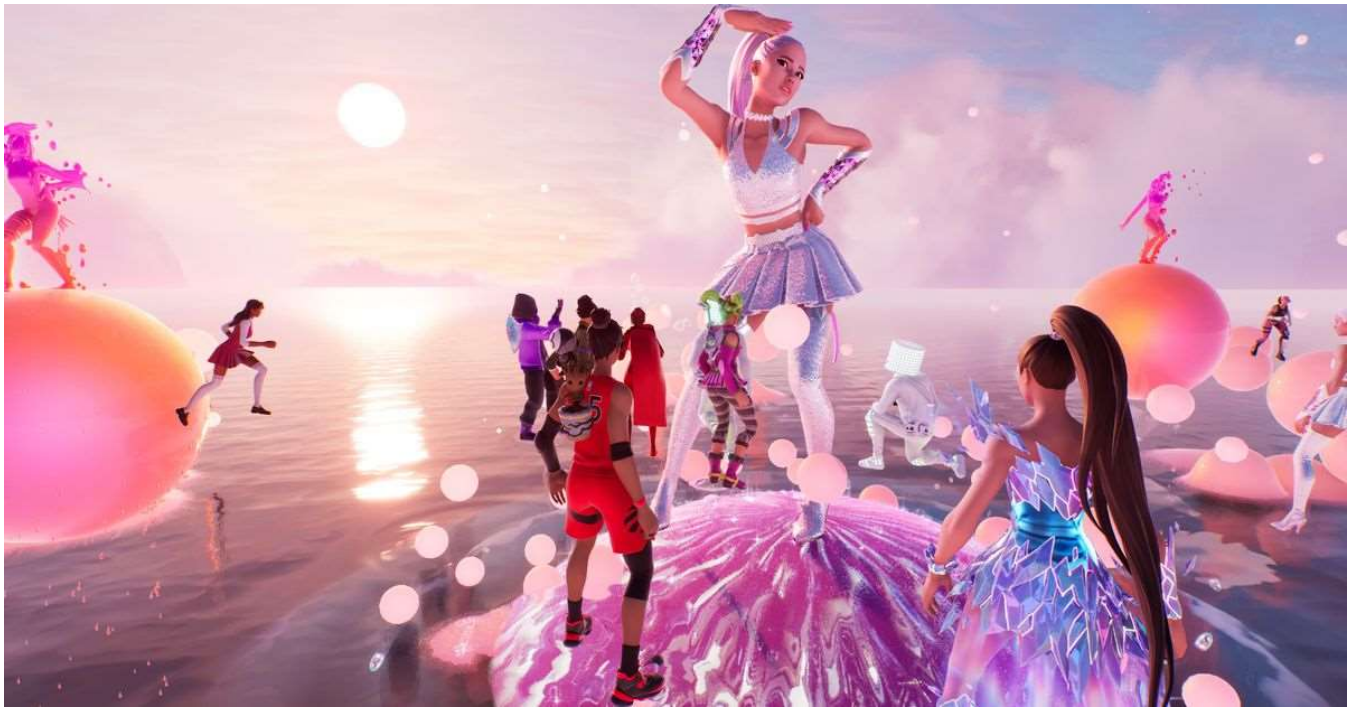

Figure 1.2: screenshot of Ariana Grande's concert in *Fortnite*, depicting her pre-programmed avatar (Image credits: Andrew Webster; The Verge)

And the third is based on a screen being represented inside the virtual space, where the concerts are presented in video format, normally creating a discontinuity between the virtual aesthetic of the video game and the real aspect of the concert: *Fortnite*'s Party Royale series and all *iHeartLand* concerts follow this format (see: Figure 1.3).

Figure 1.3: screenshot of Dillon Francis' Party Royale concert in *Fortnite*, with a screen built into the virtual space (Image credits: *Fortnite*)

Furthermore, due to their differences in presentation, in-game concerts also show a difference in availability. While the ones that require real time presence of the artists are usually one-off events, the ones based on pre-programmed avatars or pre-recorded performances normally have a launch date followed by an availability period which can last from a weekend to a few months: in this sense, they operate much more like films that come in and out of theatres than actual concerts. This bears obvious consequences for the experience of liveness in in-game concerts, which will be further discussed in Chapter 2.

Differences in format considered, most platforms that host in-game concerts seem to share a strong social component. Even in their regular functions, all the gaming platforms that host in-game concerts allow at least some sort of player-to-player communication, in the form of chat boxes, voice over communication or avatar emotes (which allow players to make their virtual counterparts dance, wave or make provocative gestures, for example). During in-game concerts, these functions tend to remain available, and become a way for players to express and share their feelings with others who might be co-participating of the sessions with them. And while, due to technical limitations faced by most gaming platforms, a server is rarely shared by more than a few dozen players (with Aurora's concert in *Sky: Children of the Light* constituting a very meaningful exception, to be discussed with more depth in Chapter 5), it is also extremely rare to see footage of in-game concerts where player-to-player interaction does *not* take place in some capacity. Thus, as much

as they are fully virtual, in-game concerts are also entirely social experiences, in which attendees gain the chance to form and strengthen bonds with one another over their shared experiences. Of course, it could be easily argued that due to their virtual and hybrid nature (which combines the logics of concert attendance and video game playing), the social experiences lived within them must be qualitatively different from the social experiences one would have with non-virtual concerts. This reflection, thus, leads to the question: *in what ways can in-game concerts affect their attendees' social experience of music consumption*?

Taken as a baseline, the idea that in-game concerts could rival traditional ones in terms of sociability while also adding new possibilities due to their virtual nature leads to a further reflection: dynamics of social inclusion and exclusion will most likely present a different behaviour within in-game concerts in comparison to their non-virtual counterparts. It is safe to hypothesise, for example, that the attendance of in-game concerts is likely to be much less physically challenging than the attendance of traditional concerts. This can in turn contribute to the inclusion of Disabled people and to a greater sense of safety, thus making in-game concerts potentially very different from non-virtual ones according to this parameter of inclusivity. On the other hand, of course, it must be taken into consideration that, as shown by Hayday & Collison (2020), the strong dominance of corporate culture within gaming platforms tends to favour hypermasculine behaviour in these virtual environments, which in turn becomes a factor in making them less safe and inclusive towards female and LGBTQIA+ participants – a type of dynamic that is very likely to carry consequences for in-game concerts as well. The crucial point is that, while it most likely differs from what is seen outside of virtual platforms, inclusivity within in-game concerts *cannot* be treated as a monolithic phenomenon: it is most likely to be articulated differently according to which parameter is being analysed (for example: gender, age, ethnicity, disabilities), and according to which platform or concert is being targeted. Thus, the second research question that drives this project is: *in what ways can in-game concerts be more – or less – inclusive than non virtual ones*?

As will be shown in Chapter 2, the pursuit of these research problems will require a theoretical foundation that enables the understanding of how sociability within these events is perceived by participants, and how inclusivity is articulated within them. The former will be addressed by drawing from the theory of liveness, as proposed by Auslander (2008), and ultimately by arguing that (unlike what happens in non-virtual concerts), the primary driver of liveness in in-game concerts are the social interactions between participants, leading to a defence of the concept of *social* liveness. The latter will be approached via a combination of two theories in social studies which, as will be argued, complement each other by enabling understanding of different aspects of inclusivity: Social Dominance Theory (as proposed by Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) and Social Inclusion Theory (as proposed by Bailey, 2005).

Considering the diverse scenario exposed above, an effective way of addressing the research questions posed is to compare social articulations in different instances of the history of in-game concerts. Thus, two cases were selected. Chapter 4 will be dedicated to the scene that sprouted from the Open Pit

festivals held in *Minecraft* from 2018 and will discuss how its hierarchy-questioning ethos allowed it to strongly articulate inclusivity of LGBTQIA+ people. And Chapter 5 will investigate the concert by Norwegian singer Aurora, launched in December 2022 in *Sky: Children Of The Light*, which constituted a crucial leap for the social possibilities of in-game concerts. Both case studies are qualitative investigations, with the methods applied in each essentially orbiting the realm of digital ethnography, as will be discussed in Chapter 3. Furthermore, each of these cases sits at one end of the five-year period encompassed by this dissertation, and it can be argued that while *Minecraft* festivals started the trend that was picked up by *Fortnite* and *Roblox*, Aurora's concert was openly influenced by the same trend. Thus, the comparison of these cases – to be carried out in Chapter 6 – can lead to important lessons about the wider reality of in-game concerts, regardless of the platforms in which they are held.

2. Literature Review

The topic proposed for this study remains underexplored from an academic perspective. It becomes crucial, then, to contextualise this research, as well as to lay a strong theoretical foundation to guide its realisation. Section 2.1 will be dedicated to the task of contextualisation, by drawing from areas such as video game studies, popular music studies, ludomusicology and sociology. Section 2.2 will focus on building a sufficiently robust theoretical foundation to encompass the complexity of the phenomenon at hand. This will be achieved via a combination of Liveness Theory (Auslander, 2008), Social Inclusion Theory (Bailey, 2005) and Social Dominance Theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

2.1 Context and connections

It is crucial to start by reiterating that over the past five years in-game concerts have reached a new level in their relevance and potential as mass-scale events. This is because of the growing number of platforms and artists who are taking part in the trend (see: Appendix A), but also because of the massive numbers of attendees they are attracting: a quick glance at the four biggest in-game concerts of the past five years indicates a clear tendency of growth: while Marshmello's concert in January 2019 kickstarted the trend with 10.7 million attendees (Webster, 2019), Travis Scott's concert in April 2020 more than doubled that, by reaching 'up to 27.7 million unique viewers' (Webster, 2020). On the same year, Lil Nas X topped this number, by reaching 33 million attendees on his *Roblox*-based performance (Kastrenakes, 2020), a record that was broken shortly after by Ariana Grande, who reached 78 million audience members on her 2021 *Fortnite* concert (Wickes, 2021). Of course, it must be taken into consideration that part of this progression occurred within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, which arguably became a factor to drive more people towards virtually mediated events such as these. Two other data, however, indicate that while the pandemic might have served as an accelerator for this trend, it cannot be pointed out as its root cause. First, the fact that the debut of massively attended in-game concerts predated the first news about Covid-19 by over a year, with Open Pit's festivals in *Minecraft*. And second, the fact that as of 2023, the phenomenon continues to grow and develop: over the past year, in-game concerts have arrived in exclusively mobile games such as *PUBG* and *Garena Free Fire* (Ombler, 2022-a; 2022-b), and in December 2022 thatgamecompany broke new ground by introducing, with an in-game concert, technology that allows up to 4,000 people to interact in real time within an online game server (Chen, 2022-b).

The data outlined above, thus, help visualise the size, cultural relevance and mass-audience potential of in-game concerts. Despite all of this, however, close attention to the phenomenon from an academic perspective is still needed, especially when considering its most recent stages. The literature dedicated to

analysing virtual concerts in some capacity (Cheng, 2014; Kent & Ellis, 2015; Harvey, 2016; Chavez-Aguayo, 2016; Gagen & Cook, 2016; Moritzen, 2022) mostly focuses on *Second Life*, which is justifiable, given how important the platform was in normalising the notion of music concerts within virtual spaces. However, far too little has been written about the implications of such events for inclusivity, with Kent & Ellis's (2015) study on the Wheelies club in *Second Life* constituting a clear exception. Furthermore, Moritzen's (2022) article, which offers in-depth analyses into *Minecraft* and *Fortnite* concerts, stands out for its focus on in-game concerts that are part of the wave which developed over the past five years. Thus, both Kent & Ellis's (2015) and Moritzen's (2022) work become extremely valuable for this research project.

Kent & Ellis (2015) draw an in-depth analysis of Wheelies, a virtual 'disability-themed nightclub' in *Second Life* founded in 2006 which, according to the authors, 'promotes an inclusive environment through the streaming of live music' and 'offers a place for people to express their disability pride through their avatars and through that a political message of inclusion and acceptance' (Kent & Ellis, 2015:85). Thus, it becomes clear that their study is focused on a particular instance in *Second Life* which has the integration between virtual music events and inclusivity as one of its core motivations. Still, it must be said that Kent & Ellis's study offers important lessons for this research project, all of which orbit the notion that *Second Life* is an avatar-based medium, and that this has implications for its potential as a social catalyst which cannot be ignored. For example, the authors reflect on the fact that Simon Stevens, the founder of Wheelies, made it a point to have a wheelchair-using avatar, which reflects his condition in real life, when he could have used the virtual medium to present himself differently. According to the authors, Stevens had a 'refusal to adopt a "perfect" avatar, electing instead to reflect his real-life reality, [which] created a social movement that people empathized with in the community' (Kent & Ellis, 2015:96). This is interesting because it speaks very deeply about the social meaning of the avatar. At the same time that there is the assumption that Stevens could have used its complete customisability as a tool for escapism or concealment of his identity (which is likely the path adopted by several people in order to achieve a sense of comfort and self-expression in virtual media), the position adopted by him shows that the avatar can also be used to make statements about one's true identity. This, in turn, resonates with theorisations found in the wider scholarship on avatars (Taylor, 2006; Yee & Bailenson, 2007; Tronstad, 2008). For example, Taylor states that the avatar

> serves as the key artifact through which users not only know others and the world around them, but themselves. Avatars are objects that not only represent people in the virtual world, but influence and propel the formation of identity and relationships. (Taylor, 2006:96)

The crucial point of this reflection is that, regardless of the path chosen, the avatar is ultimately seen as a social tool, with power to facilitate self-expression and inclusive action. Even considering the

differences between *Second Life* and the more recent platforms in the in-game concert ecosystem, the customisability of avatars is one of the core traits that binds them all together, making this reflection entirely valid and applicable to current in-game concerts as well.

The points drawn from Kent & Ellis's (2015) research also resonate deeply with studies conducted by Pearce (2011) and Delamere (2011) on the social aspects of online video games. By researching the virtual community around the multiplayer online video game *Uru: Ages Beyond Myst*, Pearce (2011) has indicated that her [my emphasis]

> research showed that the ability to visualize oneself as a unique and personalized character in the *Myst* world *introduced both an experience of proprioception, enhancing players' sense of embodiment in the world, and also a sense of unique identity*. This sense of identity was further enhanced by the presentation of this avatar to others. (Pearce, 2011:164-165)

Giving further weight to this notion, in her study on *Second Life* Delamere (2011) states that [my emphasis]

> virtual worlds as a new application add a complexity of experience *due to additional aspects that early online text-based communities did not have* including, visual richness, game character (avatar) embodiment, and a ludic (playful) environment. (Delamere, 2011:239)

What Delamere's (2011) and Pearce's (2011) reflections point to, thus, is the idea that having online social interactions be mediated by avatars and 'virtual worlds' has the potential to critically enhance the player's relationship to what is happening on the screen, adding to it a layer of 'embodiment' that can hardly be matched by media which lack these aspects. If applied to the reality of in-game concerts, these reflections indicate that they might be perceived as much closer to simulations of live music settings than livestreams, for example, in which social interactions are normally text-based. In other words, people being able to make their avatars move and dance with one another is likely to lead to a more direct sense of connection between virtual concert attendees. This is also corroborated by Yee & Bailensons's (2007) reflections on the effects of avatars over their users, according to which 'who we choose to be [in virtual environments] in turn shapes how we behave' (Yee & Bailenson, 2007:287).

Adding weight to that, in her research Pearce (2011) paints a picture which requires several real-life concepts to be reapplied in the context of a fully virtual reality. She focuses on the virtual community formed around the online video game *Uru: Ages Beyond Myst*, which was shut down shortly after its launch, in 2004. Pearce (2011) investigates the social development of this community after the traumatic event, which caused the group to migrate, fragment and form what she understands as refugee communities within other virtual platforms. Thus, she deals with concepts as real as migration, refugee communities, intercultural exchanges and xenophobia, applied to a virtual paradigm. Hence the importance that she (as

well as Delamere, 2011) attribute to the 'embodied' nature of user experience in avatar-based media. Their studies, along with theorisations from Taylor (2006) and Yee & Bailenson (2007), show that this feature has the potential to blur the lines that separate the user's perception of the real world from their perception of virtual ones, thus facilitating the permeation of virtual situations by more complex social dynamics and constructs.

Directly dialoguing with the points raised above, Moritzen (2022) analyses Travis Scott's concert in *Fortnite* and the independent festivals organised by Open Pit in *Minecraft*, according to the notion of music scenes. Thus, despite not directly addressing the issue of inclusivity, her work becomes foundational for this research, for two key reasons. First, because it corroborates the reflections on the social power of virtual media outlined above, while also demonstrating that they are indeed applicable to the object of this research. Discussing the power of avatars to create a sense of direct interaction between attendees, she states that the interactivity created by them

> events on their platforms, creating a sort of corporeality through the avatars, which influences the kinds of sociability that can be found in these spaces. The feeling of proximity between members of the audience transforms an experience that may at first seem lonely into a space of new opportunities for exercising social skills that transcend spatial limitations. (Moritzen, 2022:118)

The second reason why her work becomes so relevant here is that by analysing two different instances in the recent history of in-game concerts from the same perspective, she demonstrates that there is room for a wide range of sociability modes in the current development stage of the phenomenon, which likely also applies to the issue of inclusivity. She concludes, for example, that while the scene of *Minecraft* festivals started by Open Pit in 2018 indeed has enough social traits to be considered a *scene* (which will be corroborated by some of the findings in Chapter 4), the biggest in-game concerts, such as Travis Scott's, 'do not seem to represent many possibilities for the construction of social bonds' (Moritzen, 2022:134). She attributes that to the notion that 'Scott's presence in *Fortnite* can be compared to the great offline concerts and music events … attracting thousands of spectators and providing a large – although impersonal – experience' (Moritzen, 2022:124). This is interesting because it indicates that, despite their technological convergence, there seems to be no general rule for the way sociability is articulated in in-game concerts. Furthermore, it seems to suggest that the social power of in-game concerts is deeply linked to the way these events are organised.

Thus, it can be said that Moritzen's (2022) and Kent & Ellis's (2015) work (as well as Pearce's, 2011 and Delamere's, 2011) provide this research with strong foundations and help focus the discussion on the proposed topic. Their position as likely the most similar studies to this one, however, also corroborates that the topic of in-game concerts remains underexplored, and that inclusivity in the current stage of

development of in-game concerts is unexplored in academia. Thus, a look into less closely related literature becomes necessary.

The literature on issues of inclusivity and accessibility in non-virtual settings (Hayday & Collison, 2020; Ong et al., 2021; Castle et al., 2022) also provides crucial lessons for this study. Castle et al. (2022), for one, provide a very useful summary to start reflecting on the issue of inclusivity in music events, by stating that

> [m]ultiple factors have been highlighted as barriers to attendance at musical events, including practical considerations such as cost of travel, time limitations and "value for money" … Socio-economic factors, such as lower socio-economic status, lower household income and fewer educational qualifications, are also associated with lower levels of arts engagement … Amongst those who face some of the greatest barriers to cultural participation are individuals with disability. (Castle et al., 2022:165)

It becomes interesting to think that in-game concerts may be subject to some of the same barriers pointed out by Castle et al. (2022), albeit to different levels and for different reasons. For example, while it is clear that the attendance of in-game concerts does not require travel and admission is often free, it is also obvious that it at the very least requires an adequate equipment – a computer, cell phone or video game console – and an internet connection. Thus, while in-game concerts may perhaps be inherently more inclusive than certain non-virtual live events, it must also be taken into consideration that digital divide (Hayday & Collison, 2020:202) still is a reality, thus keeping in-game concerts from being fully inclusive from this perspective. Drawing from this reflection and Moritzen's (2022) study, it becomes clear that each parameter according to which inclusivity may be articulated in in-game concerts, such as socio-economic status, geographical location and disabilities (as pointed out by Castle et al., 2022), but also a host of others, such as age, gender, sexual orientation and ethnicity, must be individually and carefully analysed in each case, as there may also be no general rule for how in-game concerts as a category articulate inclusivity.

This is reinforced by the existence of several different organisers in the in-game concert ecosystem, with potentially different social goals regarding their virtual events (as suggested by Moritzen, 2022). This likely leads each individual in-game concert to show a particular set of characteristics when it comes to inclusivity. Ong et al.'s (2021) study on inclusivity of LGBTQIA+ people in community events in Australia helps give weight to this notion, as one of their core conclusions orbits precisely the role of the organisers in the social power of each event. According to them, their

> study suggests that event organizers have control over three key aspects of community events to transform these events towards hierarchy attenuation in pursuit of inclusivity: marketing, language and security. (Ong et al, 2021:2057)

Thus, Ong et al. (2021) point to a strong correlation between the powers of the organisers and how inclusivity may emerge in each event. And even if their targets are non-virtual events, there is no good reason to believe that this does not apply to in-game concerts as well. Thus, this reflection helps inform the design of this study: over the following chapters, particular attention will be given to the material conditions and intentionality of the organisers, which are likely to be determining factors in the articulations of inclusivity in each case.

Hayday & Collison's (2020) research on gender inclusivity in eSports comes with very important lessons on the general state and ethos of the video game industry. Their study shows that the articulation of inclusivity is 'currently fragile within the eSport space' (Hayday & Collison, 2020:197), and that is pointed out as a consequence of 'the fragmented and hypermasculine nature of the industry, which is exacerbated by corporate businesses agendas' (Hayday & Collison, 2020:205). This is crucial to this research because it speaks about a backdrop shared by eSports and in-game concerts, indicating that regardless of the individual articulations of inclusivity in each case, some pressure towards hypermasculinity and a corporate ethos is likely to permeate the entire ecosystem in which in-game concerts exist. This may, at moments, make the articulations of certain types of inclusivity (for example, gender inclusivity) 'fragile' in in-game concerts, or at the very least put it under severe tension.

Hayday & Collison's (2020) reflections on gender in the video game industry also shows some convergence with the relatively recent field of queer game studies (Shaw, 2012-a; 2012-b; Ruberg, 2018), which comes with important lessons for this research. Queer game studies scholarship is dedicated to analysing connections between LGBTQIA+ and gamer identities, which is more than likely to intersect with the issue of inclusivity in in-game concerts. For example, Shaw (2012-b) analyses the significance of the 'gaymer' identity as an intersectional construct that goes beyond the simple notion of homosexual people who play video games. In her words,

> gaymer identity [is] tied less to a queer sexuality than to a queer sensibility … That is, gaymers privileged an appreciation of and attentiveness to the artifice (and humor) of gender and sexual norms, even if they did not all share a preference of non-normative sexual preferences. (Shaw, 2012-b:69)

Thus, Shaw's reflections, as well as the wider field of queer game studies, reinforce the necessity of approaching inclusivity and oppressed identities within gaming environments as complex and multifaceted phenomena. Shaw's (2012-b) conceptualisation of the 'gaymer' identity also becomes particularly relevant to the case study presented in Chapter 4.

Thus, while the sum of the studies analysed above brings crucial lessons for this research project, it also strengthens the need for an investigation specifically targeted at the articulations of inclusivity in in-

game concerts, and reinforces the research questions raised in the Introduction. However, the need remains for a strong theoretical foundation to guide their pursuit. Achieving this will be the goal of section 2.2.

2.2 Theoretical foundations

The concept of liveness (Auslander, 2008) has emerged as a constant across most studies that focus on the intersection between music and virtuality, indicating its high potential to help further discuss the nature of in-game concerts. Due to this project's focus on inclusivity, however, the framework of liveness alone is not enough to build its theoretical foundation. Thus, two other constructs drawn from articles discussed in the previous section will be incorporated into the discussion: Social Inclusion Theory (Bailey, 2005; Hayday & Collison, 2020) and Social Dominance Theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Ong et al., 2021). This section will, thus, focus on debating the applicability of each to the object of this research, as well as how they may complement each other.

Across the literature on the concept of liveness (Auslander, 2008; Couldry, 2004; Sanden, 2019), one of the most reiterated notions is its flexible nature. Auslander (2008), for one, states that

> how live and mediatized forms are used is determined not by their ostensibly intrinsic characteristics but by their positions within cultural economy. To understand the relationship between live and mediatised forms, it is necessary to investigate that relationship as historical and contingent, not as ontologically given or technologically determined (Auslander, 2008:56)

Thus, Auslander's (2008) view can be summarised by saying that liveness cannot be seen as a fixed concept, but rather is highly dependent on context. Couldry (2004) adds further weight to this view, by positing liveness as a *constructed category*, as opposed to a natural one. He and Auslander (2008), then, seem to converge in proposing that liveness does not abide to a fixed ontology, but rather it fluctuates in relation to the given social and intersubjective reality of each time, place and community. Finally, Sanden (2019) takes this to an even more subjective level, by proposing liveness as a *perceptual* matter. Using the example of live music recordings, he states that they

> carry meaning as a type of live event because, despite the fact that they present highly mediated musical experiences, their apparent fidelity to an actual live performance carries meaning for many listeners that is absent from a studio recording. They are *perceived* as in some way live, even though their connection to a traditional performance paradigm is often rather distant. When we talk about liveness, then, we are essentially talking about how performance is perceived, and about assigning at least some of the values and ideologies

> associated with traditional performance to the musical experience in question. (Sanden, 2019:180)

Considering all three complementary definitions, it becomes obvious that the applicability of the concept of liveness to in-game concerts must be be reflected on: the fact that, regardless of their technical and organisational differences (as outlined in the Introduction), in-game concerts are indeed treated and marketed as 'concerts' by artists, attendees and organisers alike indicates that there is some shared perception of liveness at play in this case. Based on what factors this perception occurs is a more interesting question to be raised, to which, again, the joint theorisations of the three authors emerge as crucial.

Arguably, the most obvious categories of liveness are spatial and temporal liveness, both of which make up Auslander's (2008:61) definition of 'classic liveness': 'physical co-presence of performers and audience; temporal simultaneity of production and reception; experience in the moment'. If considered plainly, these definitions become hardly applicable to in-game concerts, in which attendees are only virtually co-present, the music is pre-recorded and often there is not even a need for the artist to be present in real time. If considering Sanden's (2019) elaboration on liveness as a *perceptual* category, however, these lines become severely blurred: the 'embodied' nature of avatar-mediated platforms (Pearce, 2011; Delamere, 2011) may allow attendees to perceive these events as spatially live. A similar consideration applies to the issue of temporality, however with an important caveat.

Auslander recurringly refers to the relationship between audience and performers: he talks about [my emphasis] 'physical co-presence of *performers and audience*; temporal simultaneity of *production and reception*' (Auslander, 2008:61). In most in-game concerts, however, it is generally clear that the music is pre-recorded and that the animations of the performers' avatars are pre-programmed, which would take temporal liveness out of the audience-performer interaction: none of the parts involved seem to rely on the synchronicity of this relationship for their perception of liveness, which automatically places in-game concerts as a category entirely apart from traditional live concerts. There is, however, one dimension in which co-temporality seems to be crucial to the perception of liveness in these events, which may be the one to justify the adherence of artists, attendees and organisers to the word 'concert': the relationships between different audience members as the music performance occurs. In-game concerts are largely defined by players making their avatars react to the music in virtual environments *where they can see other players do the same*. What this suggests is that they could be defined by the perception of a combination of co-spatiality and co-temporality *between audience members* (rather than between the audience members and the performer on the stage), which would be better labelled as *social liveness*.

Interestingly, Auslander (2008:61) does bring up the label of social liveness, which he vaguely defines as a 'sense of connection to others'. He, however, does so while citing Couldry (2004), which reveals an inconsistency in their dialogue: Couldry (2004) never talks about social liveness, instead positing

the idea of 'group liveness', which would be based on close peer-groups sharing information on specific events over text messages and mobile phones, thus granting them the perception of being simultaneously connected. Of course, the concept is perfectly valid and keeps some similarity to the one proposed above, however still being far from constituting a perfect match. A similar reflection applies to Couldry's (2004) concept of 'internet liveness', which Auslander (2008:61) defines as 'sense of co-presence among users'. Again, the definition converges with what is proposed above, however it fails to entirely match it due to its fundamental reliance on internet-based media: judging by Couldry's (2004) reflections, a perfect example of internet liveness would be the feeling obtained from keeping up with large scale events on Twitter, for example. Instead, what is being proposed here as 'social liveness' is a category entirely independent from internet mediation, which is highly likely be transferred to in-game concerts due to their reliance on avatars and virtual worlds, because these factors allow for a sense of 'embodied' interaction between players (Pearce, 2011; Delamere, 2011).

Consider the following example. In 2018 and 2019, Marvel Studios released two films which were the culmination of a saga the company had been exploring for the past ten years: Avengers: Infinity War (2018) and Avengers: Endgame (2019). This caused screening rooms to be filled with people who attributed great emotional value to the films, which then led to crowds collectively cheering, screaming and crying loudly at crucial moments of the plots. One of the outcomes of this was a very interesting trend: fans uploading videos to YouTube of opening-night screenings of the films, many of which had tags such as 'audience reaction' and 'crowd reaction' in their titles (for example: Clip Channel, 2021). Interestingly, it is quite easy to find, in the comment sections of these videos, users indicating that they greatly attribute the quality of their experience with the films to their co-presence with other audience members. In Clip Channel's (2021) video, some of the comments read [my emphasis]:

> *I remember the way people in my theatre were screaming and cheering* and some guy almost fell over into the seat in front of him yohhhhh this franchise brings everyone together no matter what. (V.A.)
>
> People say they can't wait for movie theaters to die, but be honest, *the audience cheering made this scene so much more epic*. (N.A.)
>
> I was lucky enough to be in a audience like this and I fully participated it was so much fun I legit with *yelling and laughing and crying at the same time it was the best moment of my life*. (S.S.D.)

It becomes interesting to ponder, then, what does this phenomenon say about liveness. It is clear in this case that the direct connection between each individual audience member and the film being screened

is, despite being important, not the crucial factor to the collective experience reported by commentors. Unlike what usually happens in live concerts, fans knew that they would eventually be able to watch those exact same films again, which indicates that the films could not have been the fundamental cause of any perception of liveness. Instead, as indicated by the comments, the key driver of liveness in this case seems to have been the interaction of each audience member with a crowd that was reacting to the films in an explicit way, thus validating and potentially amplifying each other's own reaction. It becomes clear, then, that this differs greatly from what Auslander (2008) labels as 'social liveness', thus reinforcing the redefinition proposed above. The question that remains is: to what extent could this category of liveness be considered applicable to audience experiences during in-game concerts?

Once again, reflections on the effects of avatar-based media (Taylor, 2006; Yee & Bailenson, 2007; Pearce, 2011; Delamere, 2011) become useful: it is safe to hypothesise that players may project their sense of proprioception to the avatars on the screen, thus making their experience during in-game concerts highly subject to social liveness. Pearce (2011:165) helps further reinforce this, by elaborating what she defines as 'seeing and being seen', according to which a '[p]layers' sense of presence was enhanced not only by seeing themselves, but also by being seen by others'. If, therefore, social liveness can critically permeate attendees' perceptions of their experiences during in-game concerts, this most likely enhances the potential of such events to also be perceived as inclusive and conducive to a sense of participation. However, while the notion of social liveness can be extremely helpful in the process of understanding the social power of in-game concerts, this framework alone is not enough to analyse their potential for inclusivity.

Hayday & Collison (2020) demonstrate the use of a theoretical framework with huge potential to help fill this gap: Richard Bailey's (2005) Social Inclusion Theory. Originally proposed as a theory to analyse inclusion in a context of sport and physical education, Bailey's framework essentially posits that there are four dimensions according to which it may be articulated. In his words:

> *Spatial*: social inclusion relates to proximity and the closing of social and economic distances;
> *Relational*: social inclusion is defined in terms of a sense of belonging and acceptance;
> *Functional*: social inclusion relates to the enhancement of knowledge, skills and understanding; and
> *Power*: social inclusion assumes a change in the locus of control
> (Bailey, 2005:75)

Two main factors are noteworthy about Bailey's theory. The first is that by relying on the concept of 'dimensions', it automatically assumes that inclusivity is an inherently multifaceted phenomenon. And the second is that in each of these dimensions there may occur articulations of exclusion as well as inclusion. In other words, the theory allows for the hypothesis that while there can be correlations between the

articulations of inclusion in different dimensions (for example, a given event may simultaneously generate inclusion in the relational and power dimensions, with a strong synergy between the two, as will be seen in Chapter 4), there may also be instances where a given activity generates inclusion on one dimension while being neutral or even generating exclusion on another (for example, an event may generate inclusion in the relational dimension while generating *exclusion* in the power dimension, as will be seen in Chapter 5). Furthermore, not only Hayday & Collison (2020) corroborate the usefulness of this framework, but they do so while applying it to a phenomenon sufficiently close to the object of this research: the realm of eSports, which also relies on video game-based worlds as stages for mass-scale events. Thus, Hayday & Collison's (2020) successful application of Bailey's (2005) theory constitutes sufficient evidence that it is adequate to the analysis of in-game concerts as well, with one caveat: the literature demonstrates that Social Inclusion Theory is very effective in explaining how inclusivity may manifest itself in different situations. It does not speak clearly, however, about *who* are the subjects of inclusivity. Yet another theoretical framework is needed to address this issue.

Ong et al.'s (2021) study on the inclusivity of LGBTQIA+ people in events in Australia is strongly rooted in Sidanius & Pratto's (1999) Social Dominance Theory. Rooted in social psychology, Social Dominance Theory 'proposes that societies which produce economic surpluses are inherently structured as systems of group-based social hierarchies where there are dominant and subordinate groups' (Ong et al., 2021:2046). From this premise, the theory builds on to posit that these subordinate groups (called in Sidanius & Pratto's terms 'out-groups') can be defined with basis on gender, age or arbitrary systems. The latter would open a pathway for segments of society to be considered out-groups according to several other factors, including (but not limited to): sexual orientation, disabilities, ethnicity, cultural origin and economic status. The final aspect of Sidanius & Pratto's (1999) framework is the dynamic between out-groups and their counterparts, the in-groups. The authors propose that oppression of the latter over the former is often tacit and based on in-groups modifying the environment to their own interests, at times without realising that this might cause hindrances to the social participation of members of out-groups. This exclusory pressure of in-groups over out groups is named 'hierarchy enhancement' and any pressure aimed at countering it is, in Sidanius & Pratto's (1999) terms, called 'hierarchy attenuation'. Illustrating this, Ong et al. (2021:2052) point out that the public use of symbols linked to the LGBTQIA+ community, such as the pride flag and the acronym itself, were seen by their interviewees as hierarchy-attenuating elements, with the power of making queer people feel safer to attend certain events, which ultimately translates in an articulation of inclusion.

It must be pointed out that the definition of out-groups being tied to the notion of arbitrary systems also adds complexity to what this theory might say about inclusivity. Taking into consideration a concept such as intersectionality, it becomes clear that a given individual may pertain to several out-groups *and* in-groups at the same time, and furthermore that one's self and social perception as the member of either is

highly dependent on context. Thus, if the articulation of inclusion can be correlated with the notion of hierarchy-attenuation (as Ong et al., 2021 demonstrate), it must be considered that inclusion is, from this perspective as well, a multifaceted phenomenon.

Thus, by putting Social Inclusion Theory and Social Dominance Theory side by side, it becomes clear that they can constitute complementary perspectives on the same phenomenon. While Bailey's (2005) theory allows for a clearer understanding of *how* inclusivity may operate, Sidanius & Pratto's (1999) framework is very useful in understanding *who* are the actors who participate in dynamics of inclusion and exclusion and what makes them so. Furthermore, both seem to complement each other in explaining the object of inclusivity: considering that the oppression translated by Sidanius & Pratto (1999) as 'hierarchy enhancement' is often enacted (and therefore can be countered) at symbolic and subjective levels, it is easy to understand that it can operate in each of Bailey's (2005) dimensions of inclusion (spatial, relational, functional and power). Therefore, the two theories combined can add depth to the analysis of inclusivity in any given situation.

Finally, it must be said that there is no good reason why the two theories would not work in synergy with the framework of liveness discussed above. As stated, social liveness is likely to help understand the foundations of social interaction within in-game concerts, which will lead to a clear outline of the stage where the concepts from Social Inclusion Theory and Social Dominance Theory can come into play. Therefore, the combination of these three theoretical frameworks will inform the remainder of this study.

3. Methodology

Considering the virtual and relatively novel nature of this research's object, its investigation requires careful methodological considerations. This chapter will be dedicated to them. Section 3.1 will be dedicated to discussing the choice for qualitative methods, with special attention to the application of ethnographic methods to digital and virtual settings. Section 3.2 will address ethical discussions that came up during the realisation of this project, especially referring to covert participant observation in virtual environments. And finally, section 3.3 will be dedicated to discussing issues of reflexivity and positionality that may assist in the interpretation of the data exposed over the following chapters.

3.1 Methods

There are three levels at which this research may be described from a methodological standpoint. At a macroscopic level, it is a comparative multi-case study (Clark et al., 2021:63): the following two chapters will each dive into one particular instance of the history of in-game concerts, generating data which will be contrasted and compared in Chapter 6 for a deeper discussion on the phenomenon at hand. The choice for this format came naturally, as the ecosystem of in-game concerts is currently constituted of multiple events and organisers, leading to the conclusion that a comparison between two of them would likely lead to a richer visualisation of themes and patterns than a single case study could. Furthermore, each of the chosen cases sits at pivotal points in the history of the phenomenon: while the one in Chapter 4 has arguably helped inspire the biggest commercial in-game concerts, the one presented in Chapter 5 was openly influenced by (and critical of) them. This makes the choice for these particular cases a fertile ground for reflections on the wider reality of in-game concerts, as will be observed in Chapter 6.

At a second level of detail, it can be said that each of the case studies is predominantly a digital ethnography (Clark et al., 2021:411), as the core data in them was obtained from active engagement with online communities related to the video games and virtual concerts in question. As will be further discussed below, this methodological approach is justified by the communal and subjective nature of these virtual events, as well as by the socially oriented perspective of this research project.

Finally, at the most granular level it must be said that the ethnographic approach was made up of a combination of social media research, semi-structured interviews, participant observation and secondary data analysis, all of which added different levels of depth and complexity to the data obtained. It is important to make clear that at this level there were some minor methodological differences between the two case studies. While both had comparable levels of social media research and secondary data analysis, the circumstances found caused the case study in Chapter 4 to rely more on semi-structured interviews, whereas

the one in Chapter 5 offered more opportunities for participant observation. That being said, given the qualitative essence of this research, the data generated from each case study were considered very similar in nature and easily comparable. Thus, the methodological differences between the case studies were considered unlikely to have negatively impacted the results.

The ethnographic approach emerged as the most adequate for this research in its early stages. A superficial glance of the phenomenon of in-game concerts made it clear that in participants actively interact and communicate with one another via a host of resources, which include (but are not limited to) chatting via text and making their avatars jump and dance in ways that emulate non-virtual interactions. This led to the notion that an appropriate understanding of the effects of such interactions for sociability and inclusion would necessarily demand some level of first-hand experience of the events, for which the most effective method would arguably be participant observation (Clark et al., 2021:391). Drawing from this reflection, however, it was also clear from the beginning that active participation in virtual events was unlikely to yield in-depth data on the feelings and experiences of other attendees, purely due to the dynamic nature of these events: it would at best be unpractical to try to ask participants deeper questions during the concerts. This led to the conclusion that other forms of accessing potential attendees were necessary, and given the virtual nature of the topic, social media emerged as an ideal medium for that. Thus, the basic strategy for finding potential participants in both cases was centred on Reddit, a social media platform divided in interest-based forums (called subreddits) which are mostly open to new members. This allowed for a pre-selection of subreddits dedicated to topics related to in-game concerts: for example, subreddits focused on video games known for having hosted concerts or dedicated to artists known for having participated in them were shortlisted as highly relevant.

In both case studies, interaction with participants began with a post on a relevant subreddit where I disclosed my status as a researcher and made an initial prompt for members to talk about their social experiences with the virtual events. And, in both cases, there were members who responded directly with public comments about their experiences, whereas others volunteered to speak privately in more depth. Furthermore, in both cases this initial strategy eventually led to me finding out about and joining communities on a second social media platform, Discord. The Discord communities were found to be less open than the ones on Reddit, and more dedicated to organising practical action or nurturing inner connections than to simply enabling public discussions on the topics of interest. That was when the two cases slightly diverged in methodological terms: Trans Music, the Discord community investigated in Chapter 4, was no longer organising in-game events when I joined, so engagement with it led to more opportunities for interviews than for participant observation. The opposite happened with Aurora 2.0, the Discord community analysed in Chapter 5, which was found to be completely streamlined for event organisation and attendance.

Lastly, in both cases there was a need for secondary data analysis, for three reasons. First, it was crucial, for a full visualisation of the phenomenon and assessment of the relevance of the chosen cases, to comprehend the evolution of in-game concerts in recent years. Thus, via constant monitoring of social media and news outlets, a chronological database of in-game concerts was built. It is available for consultation in Appendix A. Second, there was a need to understand the material conditions, institutional status and intentions of the organisers behind each case, to gauge the full extent of their social power. This was achieved with the analysis of several relevant interviews and news stories, as will be shown over the next two chapters. And third, particularly in the case study presented in Chapter 4, since engagement with the Discord community offered no opportunities for participant observation in the concerts, the analysis of accounts and videos of the events published by third parties was necessary for a fuller understanding of how they worked.

3.2 Ethical considerations

The digital ethnographic methods described above come with a host of ethical issues that must be addressed, particularly ones referring to consent and confidentiality. This section will be dedicated to outlining them and how they were dealt with over the course of this study.

The main issue that was raised during the planning stages was regarding the consent of participants observed during direct fieldwork in in-game concerts. An initial proposition was made that participant observation in virtual concerts should be fully covert, primarily due to how unpractical it would be to reveal my identity as a researcher and ask for consent of participants as the events unfolded. That is not only because in-game concerts are normally fast paced in nature, but also because direct, text-based communication between attendees is not always possible or simple to conduct: platforms such as *Sky: Children of the Light*, severely limit text-based conversations for safety reasons. Given that the main goal intended for observation in in-game concerts was to obtain insight on how players interact during the events, it was posed that, even if possible, disclosing my identity during these situations would likely cause disruption to the observed interactions.

Thus, by drawing from Achterbosch et al. (2018) and van Ommen (2018), who have reported facing similar issues with in-game studies, it was proposed as a risk mitigation strategy that all participants observed during virtual concerts would be fully anonymised in the final product of the research. This serves the double purpose of protecting the identity of people who might be unable to give informed consent, while also allowing for a smoother effort and more focused observations in these instances of the research work. This was the protocol adopted.

Besides in-game participant observation, this research also involved more direct interactions with responding and observed parties, in instances where social media observation and semi-structured interviews took the lead. In these cases, because they do not share the same issues and limitations described for in-game concerts, my identity as a researcher was disclosed from the first interaction, and respondents were encouraged to ask any questions they might have about the research. Furthermore, they were consulted on how they would like to be cited and given the option of being featured with their real names or pseudonyms of their choice.

All of these research procedures were carried out in accordance to the University of Glasgow's ethics policy. Approval from the College of Arts & Humanities Research Ethics Committee was granted before any fieldwork was initiated.

3.3 Positionality and Reflexivity

Given the nature of the object of this study and the methods chosen, it becomes crucial to acknowledge that there is a great deal of subjectivity in this research. This does not serve the purpose of disqualifying the results obtained, but of aiding in their interpretation. Thus, this section will be dedicated to discussing the notions of positionality and reflexivity, and how they have affected the data collection process.

The concept of positionality (Clark et al., 2021:132) became particularly relevant to this research project due to its focus on inclusivity. Drawing from the work of Sidanius & Pratto (1999), discussed in the Literature Review, it can be said that the need for inclusivity pre-supposes a state of oppression (and therefore of vulnerability) of a given group. Thus, there was the concern that me not necessarily facing the same forms of oppression and exclusion as the respondents I was going to interact with, combined with my position as a researcher (which automatically adds some verticality to the relationship) could have a negative impact on my interchange with respondents, and potentially lead to me misinterpreting the data obtained from them. This was mitigated by actively attempting to create a two-way relationship with respondents and seeking to alleviate the pressure potentially placed on them, for example by encouraging them to also ask me questions and gauge my perspective as a researcher. The clearest example of this were my initial interactions with Nia, a member of the Discord community Trans Music, analysed in Chapter 4. While enthusiastic and willing to speak, when she first brought up the Trans Music community in our conversations, she was openly wary of letting me in, indicating that she was trying to protect herself and her group from potentially harmful interactions with outsiders. She then asked for more information on myself and the research, leading to a fruitful interchange with the members of this community. And while this process benefitted Nia and the Trans Music community from a safety perspective, it also benefitted my

practice as a researcher, by allowing me to grow a more genuinely attentive look to the issues faced by them, even if they might differ from concerns immediately obvious to me as a cisgender person.

The topic of reflexivity (Clark et al., 2021:368) also permeates the anecdote related above, as well as several others in this research journey. Especially due to the ethnographic nature of the methods chosen, in several moments the investigation made me feel included and socially connected to others, which could not be ignored. The clearest example of this was my interaction with the community around *Sky: Children of the Light*, explored in Chapter 5. The response of several Reddit users to my initial prompt was inclusive in nature, as they began to invite me to partake in that experience with them, ultimately leading to me joining the Aurora 2.0 server on Discord. Thus, part of my conclusions on this game and concert inevitably came from how I was directly impacted by my interaction with the community around them. Again, this does not automatically diminish the critical quality of the analyses made. Rather, the acknowledgement of these factors helps enrich the results of this study, by giving them an additional layer of depth and complexity.

With these considerations clear, the next two chapters will cover the case studies in question.

4. *Minecraft* festivals, transgender inclusivity and hierarchy attenuation

This chapter will be dedicated to exploring and discussing the phenomenon of *Minecraft* festivals, a subset of events within the wider horizon of in-game concerts which began to gain traction in 2018 with the formation of Open Pit, an independent virtual collective dedicated to organising medium-to-large-scale music festivals within the platform. Despite never having reached the numbers of concerts in platforms such as *Fortnite* and *Roblox*, *Minecraft* festivals have acquired relevance by displaying unique characteristics from a technological, artistic and social perspective. Technologically, they differ from the largest in-game concerts that followed due to their infrastructure being clearly more precarious in comparison, which in turn ends up placing these events at a transition point between full-on in-game concerts and standard livestreams, and makes them fertile ground for a discussion about the significance of in-game concerts. Artistically, they stand out for having their history interwoven with the trajectory of the US-based experimental hyperpop duo 100 gecs (Moritzen, 2022), which helps further contextualise their ethos and politics. And drawing from that, their social relevance stems from the fact that they were shown to constitute predominantly hierarchy-questioning spaces, which display a very strong correlation with the inclusivity of LGBTQIA+ people in general and of transgender people more specifically.

4.1 Context and background: the origin and defining traits of *Minecraft* festivals

Minecraft festivals arguably constitute the starting point of the current stage of development of in-game concerts. Before they began to occur, in September 2018, no evidence could be found of people gathering massively in game-mediated spaces to listen to music being performed: for instance, according to Gagen & Cook (2016:191), even a platform such as *Second Life* allowed 'no more than around forty, or in exceptional cases a hundred, avatars [to be] in the same place at the same time', thus indicating that it was far from achieving the scale that would become the rule from 2018 onwards, with thousands and in some cases millions of simultaneous attendees. And shortly *after* the first *Minecraft* festivals, in-game concerts involving mainstream artists and millions of attendees began to pick up speed: Marshmello's landmark concert in *Fortnite* occurred in February 2019 (Webster, 2019), just five months after the first *Minecraft* festival on record, Coalchella (Park, 2018). Thus, while it may be impossible to say whether *Minecraft* festivals actively *inspired* companies such as Epic Games (which is in charge of *Fortnite*) to start investing in mass-scale in-game concerts, the chronology of events surely does indicate that the first *Minecraft* festivals served at the very least as a public proof-of-concept, thus heralding the cascade of events that was about to unfold. Interestingly, however, *Minecraft* festivals differ in several ways from the type of

event represented by Marshmello's concert and others that followed. In order to discuss their social relevance, thus, it becomes crucial to lay out their history and defining traits.

Despite being hosted in *Minecraft* – which boasts the title of best-selling video game in history, and was bought by Microsoft in 2014 for US$2.5 billion (Gordon, 2019) – the history of *Minecraft festivals* gives no indication of corporate participation, massive investments or mainstream music industry partnerships. Quite on the contrary. The starting point in their trajectory was the formation of Open Pit, an independent collective which had initially set out to virtually celebrate the birthday of one of its founders, Max Schramp, in 2018. According to him,

> [i]t started out as a joke on Twitter like, "Let's do a birthday party in *Minecraft*!" I was producing music at the time, and a lot of my friends were also producing music. So, we built this little world in *Minecraft* and I was like, "What if we had DJs playing on this little stage we built in one of the mansions?" (Schramp et al., 2020)

Another core member of Open Pit, Umru Rothenberg, complemented this by stating that 'we were expecting 40 or 50 people, and it ended up being a couple hundred' (Schramp et al., 2020).

Following the success of their would-be private event, the group sought to take a step further in their status as a virtual events team by organising their first public festival in September 2018, Coalchella (a wordplay with 'Coachella', the non-virtual music festival and 'coal', an item commonly found in *Minecraft*, which set the tone for the names of other events organised by Open Pit), in September 2018. From its inception, this event was shown to be much more ambitious than its predecessor, with a bill that featured over 50 different bands and artists, from fully underground and independent names to acts that already boasted a certain following due to being featured in other popular media: according to Morgan Park (2018), who drew a detailed report of his experience with the festival,

> [t]he lineup featured a bunch of independent artists I had never heard of before, most of which come from a tight-knit Soundcloud community, as well as some more recognisable names. Chiptune band Anamanaguchi, known for its original music [in] the Scott Pilgrim vs. The World: The Game soundtrack, was set to close the show. (Park, 2018)

It must be noted that even with this expanding ambition, from the beginning Open Pit cultivated an openly hierarchy-questioning ethos, which is evidenced by several factors in the group's early trajectory. On one hand, there was an apparent intention not to be publicly perceived as an institution: the name 'Open Pit' was not officially adopted until the group's third festival, in September 2019, which, according to Umru Rothenberg, 'was intentional. We didn't want it to seem like it was about us as a brand or a company. We wanted the events to just highlight artists and members in our community' (Schramp et al., 2020). On the other hand, there was an overt support of the LGBTQIA+ cause, including a relationship with musicians

with deep connections to it: for instance, among its roster of independent artists, Coalchella's bill also featured 'Laura Les and Dylan Brady (100 gecs)'. Formed in 2015, the duo was yet to release their first album (which came out in May 2019) and was in fact making their live debut: 100 gecs' participation in Coalchella was their first performance on record and set a trend for their relationship with *Minecraft* festivals, as they would go on to make appearances in several other similar events, organised by Open Pit or not. 100 gecs feature a transgender musician in their lineup (singer and songwriter Laura Les), and as they gained popularity over the following years they came to be seen as an inherently disruptive act: as Luce (2021:17) puts it, '100 gecs primarily "queers" pop music by experimenting with voice modulation. The duo's use of the technology often makes the gender of the singer unrecognizable'. Thus, the synergy between 100 gecs and the scene that was arguably started by Coalchella goes beyond purely musical aspects, and also provides evidence of a high level of integration between *Minecraft* festivals and the LGBTQIA+ cause, to be discussed in further detail in section 4.2.

From a technical standpoint, Coalchella took advantage of a foundational characteristic of *Minecraft*: the game allows (and in fact encourages) players to build their own highly customisable virtual scenarios (Moritzen, 2022:127), a mechanic which allows a very high level of detailing while inevitably sticking to the blocky and square-looking aesthetic of the base game. These player-created scenarios can then be freely shared with other players, which effectively gives a group such as Open Pit the power to create virtual venues, specifically planned and stylised according to the creative vision for each event (see: Figure 4.1). This is evidenced by Schramp's declarations about his *Minecraft*-based birthday party (Schramp et al., 2020) and further detailed by Park (2018), when he states that

> [t]he Coalchella server was a community project built over the course of a month, and the results were breathtaking. A meticulously designed central hub guided attendees between the two stages, REDBLOCKS and BEDROCKS. Giant community creations like a colorful Ferris wheel, to-scale IKEA blimp, giant vodka bottle, and IHOB restaurant flanked the skyline from every angle. (Park, 2018)

Figure 4.1: a screenshot of Coalchella shows the virtual scenario created by Open Pit. (Image credits: Morgan Park)

However, if on one hand *Minecraft*'s built-in mechanics are clearly optimised for the creation of complex scenarios, the same cannot be said about audio streaming, which is arguably among the most crucial traits of a virtual concert. In fact, *Minecraft* does not allow players to stream *any* sort of audio into the game. Thus, when attending *Minecraft*-based music events, users are forced to resort to external audio streaming platforms, effectively making this a layered – and not fully integrated – experience. In the case of Coalchella, in order to fully experience the event, users had to load 'up the Mixlr page streaming the sets live while positioning themselves at the right stage, where the current DJ would stand at the turntables in their blocky avatar form' (Park, 2018). This is interesting primarily because it raises the question: why have these events be *Minecraft*-based in the first place? After all, a concert is by definition a musical gathering, and at first it might seem counterintuitive to organise one in a platform which does not allow music to be played and forces users to draw sonic input from elsewhere. This view can be reinforced with data brought up by Park (2018), according to whom '[b]y the end of the night, Coalchella had seen over 2,600 attendees in the server and over 27,000 people listen in on Mixlr'. This essentially indicates that while a good number of people had access to the purely musical experience organised by Open Pit, less than 10% of those people were able (or willing) to complement that with the game-based aspect of the event, pointing to the idea that it was not indissociable from the music.

The solution to this dilemma seems to lie in the enhanced interactivity (and furthermore, sociability) enabled by the video game in complement to the purely sonic musical experience. This seems to be among

the core values of Open Pit, as according to Umru Rothenberg '[e]ven though it's nothing like meeting your favorite artists, it's so easy and fun when there's a visual and you can see all these people around you … Most livestreams don't have that kind of engagement' (Schramp et al., 2020). Low Poly, one of the artists featured in Coalchella, helped give tangibility to this notion in a Reddit post where they stated [my emphasis]:

> If you're lame you can just tune in to the audio on the website but *join the server and discord to dance at the stages, interact with the community,* explore the batshit world everyone built and play games. (Low Poly, 2018)

The dance action Low Poly refers to essentially means players making their avatars run and jump around the virtual space while seeing other players do the same (see: figure 4.2), whereas the community interaction was essentially mediated by a chat box built into the game, both of which can arguably enhance the sense of player-to-player interaction as the event unfolds. This idea was also commented on by Park (2018), who stated that '[t]he entire festival was never devoid of some sort of technical issue, but there were some real moments of magic where it felt like a real concert'. Thus, the evidence seems to converge to the notion that the video game matters primarily for its ability to add a sense of direct interaction to the shared musical experience, which will be further explored in Section 4.3.

Figure 4.1: a screenshot of Open Pit's festival Lavapalooza shows the avatars interacting inside the virtual venue. (Image credits: Open Pit)

Park (2018), however, also alludes to 'technical issues', which in this case refer to yet another aspect of *Minecraft* which appears to be a hindrance when it comes to the organisation of virtual music festivals. The platform does not appear to be optimised to support large gatherings with thousands – or even hundreds – of players interacting with one another simultaneously (and in fact, as will be discussed in Chapter 5, as of 2023, crowd support in online video games appears to be a very exclusive technology). This means that a gathering of even a few thousand people, as was the case for Coalchella, caused visual glitches which may have interfered with the fluidity of the experience (or, as Low Poly puts it, the 'dance'): according to Park (2018), not only were there issues with logging into the server due to the sheer quantity of people trying to do it at the same time, but once the musical experience effectively began, '[t]he server was still laggy enough that other attendees appeared to be standing still until the server updated their location'. This effect can be confirmed by footage of Coalchella (as well as several other *Minecraft* festivals) available on YouTube, which shows the player's avatar unequivocally surrounded by dozens of others. The other avatars, however, appear to be frozen, only moving (abruptly and all at the same time) every few seconds. It is not difficult to imagine how an issue like this could hinder the player's ability to fully connect with the concert experience.

A possible solution to this, which was employed in Coalchella, would be to separate the thousands of players attempting to engage with the concert in multiple collective servers with a few players each. By this method, all players would have access to an identical version of the virtual venue (and, due to the audio coming from an external source, there would be no issues with access to it). And while this may make for a smoother experience, allowing players to interact more with one another via their avatars, the downside is that the pool of players with whom each one interacts becomes significantly smaller. This may partially undermine the sense of social connection which, as shown, seems to be at the very core of the decision of hosting these events in *Minecraft* in the first place. Park (2018) illustrates this situation:

> [a] few hours into the show, the organisers restarted the server once more to relaunch it on a more sophisticated setup. Under this new system, Coalchella was running on 30 mirrored servers at once that each had a player capacity of a few hundred. This alleviated what was left of the connection issues, but it wasn't a perfect solution. Splitting the crowd up meant that your server might be empty in places compared to others. (Park, 2018)

It must be noted, however, that these technical imperfections did not keep Open Pit from organising more *Minecraft*-based events. Following their self-assessed success with Coalchella, the group had a growth trajectory until August 2020 and organised seven other *Minecraft* festivals: Fire Festival (January 2019), Mine Gala (September 2019), Nethermeant (April 2020), Square Garden (April 2020), Aeth3r (May 2020), String Formal (June 2020) and Lavapalooza (August 2020), all of which were based on the same technical blueprint of Coalchella, albeit in growing scale as the events gained popularity. Gordon (2019) indicates that the virtual crowd at Fire Festival was 'over 5,000 strong', twice as big as Coalchella's, and according to Lia, one of the interviewees who will be commented on over the following sections, Square Garden reached the mark of 17,900 people. Regarding this trajectory, three points must be highlighted.

First, as already touched on above, in several ways Open Pit made sure to express a hierarchy-questioning and LGBTQIA+-inclusive ethos throughout its trajectory: according to Gordon (2019), the virtual venue for Fire Festival was 'emblazoned with the LGBTQ+ rainbow alongside the blues, pink and white of the transgender flag'. Furthermore, the festival itself served as a fundraiser: through the implementation of a VIP system, which allowed players to pay real money for virtual merchandise, Open Pit was able to raise US$1,750.97 for The Trevor Project, 'an organisation providing crisis intervention and suicide prevention services to LGBTQ people under 25' (Gordon, 2019). This set a trend, as all of Open Pit's subsequent festivals also had a fundraising aspect, targeting various causes and institutions such as Covid-19 relief and Feeding America (Franklyn, 2020), but particularly ones linked to LGBTQIA+ communities: earnings from 2019's Mine Gala were destined to Rainbow Railroad, and 2020's Lavapalooza raised funds for The Okra Project, both of which tackle the issue of safety of LGBTQIA+ people from different perspectives (Fernandes, 2019; McMahon, 2020). This, combined with the

longstanding relationship between Open Pit and hyperpop duo 100 gecs (who, on top of having made their debut in Coalchella, were featured in four of Open Pit's subsequent festivals) helps justify Open Pit's legacy of having made *Minecraft* festivals a safe and inclusive space for transgender people, which will be addressed in section 4.2.

Second, the chronology of Open Pit's festivals makes it very clear that they became much more common with the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic: until Mine Gala, the rule was for one festival to be held every six months, and four were organised by Open Pit in the first half of 2020 alone. Around the same period, other *Minecraft* festivals with no direct connections to Open Pit began to appear, as is the case of Block by Blockwest (April 2020), Hospitality in the Void (August 2020) and 909 Worldwide Festival (September 2020). This coincides with other platforms, such as *Roblox* and *Fortnite*, increasing their efforts to participate in the in-game concert ecosystem (as outlined in the Introduction chapter), and points to an interesting direction: while it is obvious that *Minecraft* festivals (and in-game concerts as a whole) existed long before the pandemic, the physical isolation imposed by the lockdowns indisputably helped increase the demand for and attention to this type of virtual event. And considering the technical limitations that were laid out in this chapter, this becomes fruitful ground for a discussion on how *Minecraft* festivals enable a particular kind of socialisation over the shared musical experience, which will be carried out in section 4.3.

And third, it must be addressed that while the core members of Open Pit expressed a desire to keep organising festivals after the pandemic – with Umru Rothenberg declaring in May 2020 that '[w]e definitely aren't planning to stop after people are no longer quarantined' (Schramp et al., 2020) – the group's activities came to a halt in late 2020, due to the surfacing of sexual harassment accusations against one of its members, who was then removed from the team. While it is clear that this type of behaviour is profoundly incompatible with the ethos expressed by the group over its trajectory, the fact that Open Pit's activities had to be halted even after the removal of said member from the team indicates a significant level of institutional fragility, which ties back to its status as an underground, independent collective, with no corporate affiliations. That being said, it is also clear that Open Pit was able to leave a legacy, with several other groups setting out to organise their own *Minecraft* festivals – in very similar moulds to Open Pit's – particularly from 2020. The following sections will, thus, broaden the scope, and delve into *Minecraft* festivals beyond Open Pit.

4.2 *Minecraft* festivals as a trans-inclusive space

Upon reviewing the history of *Minecraft* festivals, it became clear that, as of 2023, these events were long past their high point, which indicated that there would likely be no chances for me to experience

any festivals first-hand, and that there would be a reduced amount of people willing to speak about their experiences with them. Furthermore, it was also obvious that *Minecraft* festivals had held a strong synergetic relationship with hyperpop duo 100 gecs, who had, since Coalchella, gathered a massive following on other platforms, boasting over 1.7 million monthly listeners on Spotify in July 2023. The combination of these factors informed my strategy to engage with potential attendees: I initially looked for participants in a Reddit community dedicated to 100 gecs. This yielded some direct accounts from attendees, as well as in-depth conversations with three people involved to different degrees in the organisation of *Minecraft* festivals, all of whom happened to be transgender women. This circled back to Open Pit's history of engagement with the LGBTQIA+ community and made clear that inclusivity of transgender people was indeed a recurring theme in *Minecraft* festivals. This section will, thus, be dedicated to analysing this relationship.

The most interesting finding regarding this topic was a thread linking 909 Worldwide Festival, a *Minecraft* event which occurred in September 2020 and had no direct affiliations with Open Pit, to Trans Music, a small community based around a Discord server which, between October 2020 and October 2021, dedicated to organising their own private *Minecraft* festivals. The 909 Worldwide Festival was organised by a collective which goes by the same name, and whose history gives indications of it having emerged from the scene around Open Pit's events: in the group's Instagram there are mentions to some of its members participating in festivals such as Mine Gala, Square Garden and Lavapalooza. Interestingly, the festival they organised on their own (which appears to have been their only *Minecraft* event) followed a blueprint very similar to the one previously instituted by Open Pit: it raised money for the National Queer and Trans Therapists Network's Mental Health Fund, and its headliner was 100 gecs member Laura Les performing a solo set. Nia, a Trans Music member related:

> [I] went to 909 worldwide fest, which had a set by Laura Les … I'm a trans woman and this event was actually a date with my then-girlfriend (also trans), since it was a safe … and accessible way to replicate being in a physical space long distance, which as one could imagine would be nice in a pandemic. (Nia)

Nia's account, thus, interestingly resonates with many of the points raised in the previous section, by simultaneously touching on the issue of LGBTQIA+ inclusion and of the *Minecraft* environment allowing for a sense of attendees sharing a same space during the music events. She went beyond, however, by stating that 'the most important result of that event was the organisation of a '[D]iscord server called trans music composed of attendees of this fest that would go on to organize smaller fests. I was part of this group of organizers' (Nia). According to her, this emerged from attendees of 909 Worldwide Fest sharing their Discord identifiers with one another by the end of Laura Les' set, and led to the formation of a group

which was capable of organising five small-scale *Minecraft* festivals, besides some other exclusively stream-based events.

Another organising member of Trans Music, Rachel, made clear that there was a strong correlation between the popularity of the server and the Covid-19 pandemic: according to her, 'the whole thing was a way to simulate the concert/show experience, even if we couldn't go to any'. Again, though, her views circle back to issues linked to the inclusivity of transgender people, as she complemented that '[the Trans Music festivals] really did give me a sense of community when I and a lot of other people needed one ([especially] me being queer and young in the south)' (Rachel). What is especially interesting is that Rachel was not as enthusiastic about *Minecraft*-based events as other respondents and interviewees on this topic: at another point of our interaction, she clearly stated that 'it's different to be in a room with living bodies, even if [I'm] doing the exact same things … and I don't think attending online shows is as fun or rewarding as irl ones' (Rachel). Even so, her considerations about the *Minecraft* festivals she helped put together tied back to aspects of her offline reality – her age and geographical context – and indicated that she was able to draw from the virtual events a sense of belonging which she might find difficult to access otherwise.

Thus, the accounts from Nia and Rachel converged with the data raised on Open Pit's festivals and confirmed that there was indeed a tendency for *Minecraft* festivals to strongly articulate inclusivity of transgender people. The question that stands, then, is: why is that? Upon being asked that, and specifically reflecting on the creation of Trans Music, Nia brought up the strong presence of 100 gecs in the *Minecraft*-based scene:

> 100 gecs/Laura Les did a whole lot of *Minecraft* shows during 2020. Incredibly trans fanbase, literally what created trans music. It could be the wake of 100 gecs that left an eddy of trans people doing *Minecraft* concerts. That definitely happened in our case. (Nia)

While Nia's answer goes a great length in helping confirm the patterns observed, it comes with the risk of leading to a circular logic: '*Minecraft* festivals are trans-inclusive because they had a strong correlation with trans-friendly artists, who attracted a large trans fanbase'. It still does not explain why that correlation began to exist in the first place. Open Pit's engagement with causes linked to the LGBTQIA+ community must be factored in: by taking the lead of this scene with active support for trans musicians and trans-related charities – not to mention the overt use of pride colours in their virtual venues, as stated by Gordon (2019) – Open Pit was successful in creating a ripple effect and establishing this as the dominant ethos for *Minecraft* festivals as a whole. This dominance of trans-inclusivity was illustrated in an anecdote from Nia, where she related her only encounter with a transphobic user in a *Minecraft* festival:

> I think one time someone who was like, unironically transphobic joined the server and was trying to be rude, and it took us … genuinely a while to figure out that they were being unironic. … And when we DID figure it out, it was hilarious. How couldn't it be? Some guy

> with a Lighning McQueen skin trying to assert some kind of social dominance by being a dick is just funny. (Nia)

Interestingly, there are no clear indications of *Minecraft* itself necessarily being a trans- or LGBTQIA+-inclusive space: Gordon (2019) comments on the fact that one of the creators of *Minecraft* was Markuss "Notch" Persson, who has publicly manifested LGBTQIA+-phobic opinions, and furthermore shows that the founders of Open Pit were aware of that and happy to create tension with the values defended by him. Adding weight to that, Lia., who is part of Open Pit's development team, related that the message "FUCK NOTCH" was commonly spammed by users in the chat box during festivals. Along with the data presented so far, this indicates that, just as Open Pit had no corporate affiliations, the dominance of a trans-inclusive mentality and spaces in the ecosystem of *Minecraft* festivals seems to have no institutional support: it is a trait which stemmed from the particular set of values of those who started this scene, and which does not necessarily speak about the wider environment in which it is hosted. Ultimately, this reinforces the connection between the trans-inclusive ethos of *Minecraft* festivals and the enforcement of a hierarchy-questioning mentality, which will be further discussed in section 4.4, and circles back to the underground nature of these events. Despite being often advertised on social media such as Twitter, Discord and Reddit, most *Minecraft* festivals seem to have been structured around a strong sense of self protection of the community linked to it, leading to a great weight being added to the role of moderators, and ultimately enabling stories such as Nia's anecdote on the transphobic participant: while the event was technically open for this person to access it, the community seems to have acted as sort of protective bubble, deliberately excluding certain harmful behaviours in order to make a safer environment for its target-population. This indicates a strong convergence between the scene of Minecraft festivals and Shaw's (2012-b) conceptualisation of the gaymer identity: the author elaborates on the gaymer scenario being dominated by a queer *sensibility*, which in turn makes the community around it a safe haven for queer people to express and develop their identities. A similar, if not identical, phenomenon seems to be at play here.

And while the data unequivocally point to this prevalence of a trans-inclusive ethos in *Minecraft* festivals, other, more general aspects of socialisation in the events were also extensively commented on by respondents and interviewees. The following section will, thus, be dedicated to discussing the ways in which *Minecraft* festivals enabled connections between their attendees.

4.3 *Minecraft* festivals as a medium for social connections

Besides the issue of inclusivity of transgender people, the review of the history of *Minecraft* festivals also made clear that, to a certain extent, they sit at a dividing line between in-game concerts and traditional

music livestreams: as explored in section 4.1, by relying on a combination of external audio streaming for the music and *Minecraft* servers for an enhancement of the interaction between players, they provide a multi-layered experience. And by doing so, they make room for questioning what is the role of the video game in these experiences, ultimately becoming fertile ground for a discussion on why in-game concerts matter in the first place. This section will be dedicated to addressing these issues in greater depth.

As was touched on in sections 4.1 and 4.2, *Minecraft* festivals were shown to rely on their video-game-based aspect primarily as a way to add to the shared musical experience a sense of direct interaction between users: as Low Poly (2018) summarised, attendees of Coalchella could listen to the music by accessing the audio stream, but they could *dance* with others by accessing the virtual venue in *Minecraft*. Nia further reflected on this idea when talking about the Trans Music festivals she helped organise:

> the tradition for the end of the fest was that we would destroy the entire world just as much as possible, which was the inspiration for [one of Trans Music festivals] ruinfest, probably my favorite show, since we did that one in a griefed stage that we had converted into a new, theme'd stage. (Nia)

What she described is essentially the action of attendees using violent mechanics enabled by the base-game to deliberately destroy the virtual venue as the festival ended, as a way to haptically engage with the music and turn that into a sense of a collective explosion of energy: her reaction when I compared this to a mosh pit was an enthusiastic 'YEAH'. Thus, this account reinforces the notion that an enhanced sense of co-spatiality between audience members is likely the biggest contribution of *Minecraft* to the experience of attending a *Minecraft* festival (as opposed to simply streaming the audio or watching artists play on a screen). And taking this as a baseline, there were two dimensions in which this fundamental element seemed to matter more to respondents and interviewees.

First, there were several indicators that the avatar-based nature of *Minecraft* also led players to an enhanced sense of self-expression, circling back to issues discussed in Chapter 2. The logic behind this is that, just as the scenarios can be carefully customised, so can each player's avatar, which may lead to each one looking and behaving in particular ways, as outlined in Yee & Bailenson's (2008) discussion on the 'proteus effect'. These may not directly reflect what each player is outside of the game, or even more so, may help players break beyond what is possible outside of the game. For example, some respondents related using the opportunity of *Minecraft* festivals to manifest themselves politically (respondent hastings_official stated: '[m]y avatar had a Bernie Sanders skin, other people who had political figures as skin formed a group with me'), or getting virtually closer to their admired artists (respondent Bacon_Waffles said: '[I] attended lavapalooza and got an epic minecraft selfie with Laura [Les]'). Furthermore, while reflecting on the role of *Minecraft* for the festivals, Lia added depth to this notion of enhanced self-expression as a function of the virtual environment, stating:

> [p]eople often create stories of their adventures in virtual worlds they create from mods, and having that world hosted as a server for multiple players to join often entails a lot of personal engagement with several people that can develop into friendships that last a long time. It also provides a space where people have somewhat of an ability to withdraw which can have varying influence on how they act in online spaces. (Lia)

Thus, in her reflection Lia directly linked the notion of self-expression to players having an enhanced ability to connect with one another. This was also corroborated by some of the other respondents (for example, heyimlilac stated: '[I] attended lavapalooza and it felt nice to share the experience of listening to music [with] others even if it was virtual') and indicates the existence of a chain of factors, where the avatar-based nature of the video game enables an enhanced sense of self-expression, which in turn leads to a heightened sense of sociability between attendees of the festivals. This inevitably circles back to the topic explored in section 4.2, and while it does not necessarily help explain the specific convergence between *Minecraft* festivals and the transgender community, it adds weight to the notion that once it occurred, the former became a very powerful tool for the inclusivity of the latter.

The second important aspect that emerged from reflections on the video-game-based nature of *Minecraft* festivals refers to different forms of safety. Safety against discriminatory action was, as expected, widely touched on, for example when Rachel brought up finding in *Minecraft* festivals a sense of community while being 'queer and young in the south', or when Nia reflected on 909 Worldwide Festival as being 'significantly less hostile of an environment, both because it was a specifically diversely organised event but also just because of the barrier you have'. It was, however, not the only facet of safety that was brought up: sheer physical safety in comparison to attending non-virtual events was also touched on, for example, when Nia stated [my emphasis]:

> In the *Minecraft* environment you can jump into the pit with reckless abandon, … so it was common to literally die in the pit. *But it's ok! You can respawn!* You couldn't go into a pit in a wheelchair in meatspace but … in *Minecraft* it's way less of a deal. (Nia)

Thus, the reflection on how the virtual experience makes up for a lack of physical safety in non-virtual ones naturally leads to thoughts on how both kinds of experiences are different rather than alike. While the in-game concert is shown to enable a sense of direct interaction between attendees that tends to liken it to a traditional concert experience in comparison to a standard livestream, this does not need to follow the rules of the physical world and does not need to abide to the same consequences, which is ultimately perceived as liberating. Drawing from a similar line of thought, many pointed out how *Minecraft* festivals were also particularly welcome in the height of the Covid-19 pandemic.

As was shown in section 4.1, the first *Minecraft* festivals came over a year before Covid-19 and thus its creation cannot be read as a consequence of it. It was also shown, however, that he beginning of the pandemic not only led to Open Pit festivals becoming much more frequent (albeit for a short period), but many other groups also set out to organise their own festivals, as is the case of Trans Music and 909 Worldwide. Some respondents reflected on the notion that this was due to *Minecraft* festivals offering a safe alternative to physical music gatherings during that period, for example when Nia defined 909 Worldwide Festival as 'a safe, [convenient] and accessible way to replicate being in a physical space long distance, which as one could imagine would be nice in a pandemic' (Nia). Furthermore, it is interesting how, despite not being particularly enthusiastic about *Minecraft* festivals (at one point stating that 'it's definitely a lot more like livestreaming than irl performances in my mind'), Rachel specifically pointed out that Trans Music festivals were 'a way for musicians and fans to interact during the pandemic and do what we all love to do; experience music' (Rachel). Thus, while her account serves as a caveat that the sense of direct interactions enabled by *Minecraft* is far from being perfect or universally accepted, Rachel helps add weight to the notion that during the Covid-19 pandemic *Minecraft* festivals were able to offer their attendees some sort of middle ground, allowing a certain level of perceived co-spatiality without the obvious health risk involved in seeking that in physical space at that time.

This section has, thus, discussed different dimensions according to which the video-game-based nature of *Minecraft* helped add depth, meaning and an enhanced sense of sociability to the experience of their attendees. This, along with the cultural and political views of those who set out to organise such festivals, helps justify the phenomenon discussed in section 4.2, of these events becoming particularly inclusive towards transgender people. The task that remains is to solidify the connections between these points under a theory-informed perspective. This will be the goal of section 4.4.

4.4 Analysis

As discussed in Chapter 2, there are three key theoretical frameworks that inform the realisation of this study: 1. Liveness theory (with particular attention to the notion of 'social liveness', as distilled from Auslander, 2008 and Couldry, 2004), 2. Social Inclusion Theory (Bailey 2005; Hayday & Collison, 2020) and 3. Social Dominance Theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Ong et al., 2021). It was argued in Chapter 2 that each one helps explain a different aspect of sociability and inclusivity in in-game concerts. Therefore, over this section they will be jointly applied over the case study exposed above for a fuller understanding of its fundamental traits, achievements and limitations.

From the standpoint of social liveness, it seems indisputable that an ability to successfully articulate it lies at the core of the relevance that *Minecraft* festivals were able to achieve. As was discussed primarily

in section 4.3, there were clear indications of the avatar-based nature of *Minecraft* leading to enhanced self-expression by attendees, which ultimately translated in people forming connections to one another as a consequence of the shared experience of the festivals, for example in the mosh pit anecdote brought up by Nia. When Park (2018) complained about the side effects of the technical solutions implemented by Open Pit on Coalchella, his primary concern was not being able to interact with as many other players as he was before, indicating that the feeling of sharing the experience in real time with a number of other people – which can be summarised as social liveness – was indeed the main driver of the quality of his experience. This account, however, is a double-edged sword, because while it does help make the case for social liveness as a fundamental trait of *Minecraft* festivals, it also provides an opening to criticise their ability to fully articulate it. Some respondents also brought up the glitchy nature of *Minecraft* festivals (for example, on their experience with seeing 100 gecs in *Minecraft* festivals, UMgtv1 stated: 'I was at Lavapalooza. Neither on them were on the stage, and the server moshpit was running at a solid 2 fps'), which, along with accounts from people such as Rachel (who has brought up direct criticism of their experience with *Minecraft* festivals in comparison to traditional live music instances), indicates that the articulation of social liveness in *Minecraft* festivals was imperfect at best, mostly due to the platform's lack of optimisation for this kind of experience.

From the standpoint of Social Inclusion Theory, it is interesting to note that, judging from the accounts that were gathered, the articulations of inclusivity were very uneven across the four dimensions proposed by Bailey (2005): spatial, relational, functional and power. There was, at best, diffuse evidence of the articulation of spatial inclusion, as very little was brought up regarding the socioeconomic reality of festival attendees, though it could be hypothesised that events such as Coalchella and Lavapalooza are likely much more inclusive – from a socioeconomic standpoint at least – than the events they draw their names from. The case is a bit clearer for functional inclusion, as all of these events – from Coalchella to Trans Music's last festival – were collective endeavours of the communities around them: between accounts from Nia, Lia and Rachel there was evidence of them acting as developers, programmers, bookers, artists and stewards, to name a few roles. Thus, the evidence points to the environment around *Minecraft* festivals being friendly to participants developing and applying their skill sets in favour of the events. When it came to relational and power inclusion, however, there was evidence of a much stronger and synergetic phenomenon going on.

The strong articulation of the inclusivity of transgender people in this scene can be read as a facet of relational inclusion, especially considering factors such as Rachel highlighting the sense of community that was achieved by Trans Music. There was strong evidence of the environment of *Minecraft* festivals enabling a sense of belonging for its participants. And while this can in part be tied back to the social liveness articulated by the festivals (which arguably creates a pathway for this sense of belonging by facilitating connections between participants), it must not be overlooked that it also keeps a strong

correlation with the articulation of power inclusion. By establishing a scene based on a particular set of hierarchy-questioning values and having all relevant functions be executed by members of its inner community without depending on major corporate or institutional affiliations, the members of Open Pit seem to have created for *Minecraft* festivals a tradition of independent control and administration. That is: the establishment of groups such as Open Pit, 909 Worldwide or Trans Music seem to be acts of power inclusion. And once the control that is gained – as small as it might be – is applied to establishing a sense of community and belonging, that means it is translating into relational inclusion. Thus, it must be said that any sense of relational inclusion perceived in *Minecraft* festivals simultaneously draws from the direct attendee-attendee interactions enabled by the game and from the particular set of values exerted by the organisers.

Finally, it becomes clear that this strong articulation of power inclusion naturally resonates with the main concepts of Social Dominance Theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Following the exercise of power inclusion by a demographic that would naturally fall under Sidanius & Pratto's (1999) definition of out-groups, the dominant ethos for the segment of *Minecraft* festivals became highly hierarchy-attenuating. So much so, that as illustrated by Nia, any attempts at hierarchy enhancement were barely acknowledged, and then ridiculed. It could be said, then, that by enabling the strong articulation of power inclusion, *Minecraft* festivals were in a way colonised by an out-group, effectively becoming a safe(r) space for its members.

Two important caveats apply to this, however. The first is that, just as the lead of *Minecraft* festivals was taken by groups with strong hierarchy-attenuating views, giving rise to the ripple effect described in section 4.2, it could have been the other way around: the scene could have been started by hierarchy-enhancing groups. Or, conversely, the scenario that was established could at any moment be disputed and taken over by groups which oppose the values enforced by Open Pit and its successors. The second is that, as Gordon (2019) points out, Open Pit's events were built on 'borrowed digital infrastructure and real estate', with the same applying to Trans Music, 909 Worldwide or any other organisers of *Minecraft* festivals. This fundamentally makes the exercise of power inclusion by these groups – as meaningful as it may be – at least partially subject to the will of the corporation who owns the platform. While this does not invalidate the inclusivity and hierarchy attenuation they were able to articulate, it does tie back to the institutional fragility of these groups and seems to indicate that there is a hard (albeit unknown) limit to the scale of the inclusivity they may be able to exert within this platform.

The history of *Minecraft* festivals nonetheless provides solid evidence that in-game concerts can be powerful tools for the inclusivity of marginalised groups and that even with technical limitations and imperfections, they can lead to a strong sense of direct sociability between attendees. The following chapter will seek to continue this investigation, by diving into the case of Aurora's concert in *Sky: Children of the Light*.

5. Aurora's concert in *Sky: Children of the Light* as a Complex Articulator of Inclusivity

Unlike Chapter 4, this chapter will be dedicated to discussing social articulations within one specific in-game event: the concert by Norwegian singer Aurora, held in the MMORPG *Sky: Children of the Light* and launched in December 2022. The concert's relevance to this dissertation stems from three key factors. First, it introduced new technical possibilities to the world of in-game concerts, by allowing up to 4,000 players to share the same game room (Chen, 2022-b), an unprecedented level of simultaneous participation in online video games, which according to the organisers translated into new possibilities in terms of player-to-player connections during the concert. Second, as evidenced by several declarations by Jenova Chen, CEO and founder of thatgamecompany (TGC, which is in charge of *Sky: Children of the Light*), the technical and artistic achievements of this event stemmed in part from a critique of previous large-scale in-game concerts, leading to an aspiration by the development team to make a virtual experience that was more social, inclusive and emotionally impactful than its counterparts. And third, engagement with the community surrounding this game and event led to a very high quantity of meaningful accounts which corroborated the achievement of the goals expressed by Chen, while also bringing attention to an apparent tension between TGC's ethos and its business model. This chapter will, thus, be dedicated to exploring and discussing this case.

5.1 Context & Background: understanding *Sky*

A key step to understanding the significance of what was accomplished in Aurora's concert in *Sky: Children of the Light* is understanding the ethos and background of the company behind the event. That is because thatgamecompany's ability to stage the concert appears to have stemmed from a combination of two crucial factors. The first factor was the studio's status as an emerging power in the online gaming ecosystem, which puts it in a strong enough position to develop new technology, create a partnership with a mainstream artist and affect millions of players. The second was its focus on creating video games that elicit deep emotional response from players, which created a fertile environment for the creative perspective behind this particular in-game concert.

Founded in 2006, thatgamecompany made their first big breakthrough in the gaming industry in 2013, when their single-player title Journey won Game of the Year at Game Developers Choice Awards (Martin, 2013). Their next project, the massive multiplayer online role-playing game *Sky: Children of the Light*, was launched six years after, in 2019, and to this date remains the company's main focus: according to Jenova Chen, by March 2022 the game had been downloaded at least 160 million times, allowing the

company to raise funding of US$160 million to keep investing in it (Chen, 2022-b). This history, combined with Chen's account stating that the company's team had jumped from less than 40 people in 2021 to 'almost 100' employees in 2022 (Chen, 2022-a), helps give materiality to the notion that TGC is, as of 2023, a company transitioning from its initial state as a small, independent game studio to a serious competitor in the economy of multiplayer online videogames.

Regardless of its economic status, a focus on emotional experiences and inclusivity seems to have permeated thatgamecompany's design ethos from its foundation. As per the company's statement on their website, their 'hope is to expand the range of emotional experiences possible in videogames, so that it can be enjoyed and loved by people of all ages, cultures and backgrounds' (Thatgamecompany, n/d). Jenova Chen adds further depth to this view, for example when he states:

> I want to make games that will entertain not just myself as a hardcore gamer, but also my wife who's a casual player, and my daughter who's only four and a half years old. I want to be able to take all of them with me to a virtual event and have something emotionally accessible and relevant to the whole family. (Chen, 2022-b)

His views are corroborated by the design of *Sky: Children of the Light*. Some of the core features and goals of the game revolve around helping, connecting with and expressing gratitude to other inhabitants of that virtual world, be they non-playing characters or avatars being controlled in real time by other players. For the most part, the game steers away from violent mechanics or imagery, which arguably contributes to make it more age-inclusive. Furthermore, *Sky* includes functionalities aimed at making player-to-player interactions safer and more culturally inclusive: for example, a multi-lingual translation tool is featured in every textual interaction via chat box, allowing players to engage in conversation regardless of their language. Such textual interactions, however, can only occur once players have befriended one another via built-in game mechanics, which adds a layer of filtering and social protection to the experience of each user.

Having a clearer grasp of TGC's background and status makes it easier to understand what the vision was for Aurora's concert, and where the means necessary to execute it came from. As stated above, the concert's most obvious achievement came from a technical and numerical standpoint: thatgamecompany actively worked on developing a new technological paradigm which allowed up to 4,000 players to experience the concert simultaneously in the same game room (Chen, 2022-b). The implication is that if a player A joins the concert, their avatar will be surrounded by up to 3,999 avatars being controlled in real time by other human players. According to Chen (2022-b), this requires the information pertaining to most of these avatars to be extremely compressed and stripped of its details. Still, it allows for some level of mass-scale interaction between players, which had not been seen before in in-game concerts: even *Fortnite*, with its mainstream partnerships and massive attendance numbers, only allows up to 40

simultaneous players in one game room (Chen, 2022-b). This comparison does not necessarily speak about the reach and scale of each game's concerts: while *Fortnite*, with its maximum allowance of 40 players per room (see: figure 5.1), has boasted numbers such as 10.7 million concurrent attendees in Marshmello's 2019 concert (Webster, 2019), Aurora's concert in *Sky* peaked at 'just' 1.6 million concurrent attendees in December 2022. This, however, means that while Marshmello's listeners were divided in around 250,000 game rooms with 40 players each, Aurora's listeners were divided in only about 400 game rooms of 4,000 players each (Chen, 2022-b, see: figure 5.2). Thus, while the numbers achieved by TGC were significantly lower than the ones achieved by the biggest in-game concerts, the possibilities introduced by the studio carry a huge significance for player-to-player interactions in these virtual events.

Figure 5.1: screeshot of Marshmello's concert in *Fortnite* shows a few dozen players sharing the same game room (Image Credits: Tim Ingham; Rolling Stone)

Figure 5.2: screeshot of Aurora's concert in *Sky* shows thousands of players sharing the same game room; each coloured cone is an individual avatar (Image Credits: u/thatskymirian; Reddit)

It becomes crucial, thus, to understand this concert beyond its purely technical aspects and to analyse closely what the studio was trying to achieve with it. Interestingly, Jenova Chen very clearly indicates that the starting point was a combination of fascination for the concerts presented by *Fortnite* and a critique towards aspects in which he believed they were lacking:

> [o]ne thing that stood out to me [about the *Fortnite* concert]: I never felt like Travis Scott was really there. He never looked at me. I don't know his soul is there. So I wanted to build [an environment] where you can feel the presence of the artist. Another thing, I went to a Taylor Swift concert, and I was in the stadium with 30,000 people, and it definitely felt like I was part of something bigger. These are the two things that I was like, "I think we can push the boundary on how a game makes you feel" (Chen, 2023-a)

He further complements this view by stating that Travis Scott's concert in *Fortnite* 'was an impressive technological wonder … When they said they had 15 million people watching together, though, it didn't really feel that way. … It didn't really feel like a real concert' (Chen, 2022-b). What stemmed from these critiques, thus, was a drive to make an in-game concert that went beyond the limitations he pointed out and got closer to conveying the feelings and emotions normally associated with 'real' concerts. The aspiration to make audience members feel like they were engaging with a real-life crowd was one aspect of it, which drove Chen and his team to work on the technology discussed above for six months ahead of the concert (Chen, 2022-b; 2023-a). Several other aspects, however, were also allegedly tackled, with the intent of making the experience more lifelike and emotionally meaningful to players. For example, they addressed the issue of 'soullessness' of the artist's virtual presence by carefully designing the concert's visuals and storytelling around the artist's repertoire (Chen, 2023-a). Furthermore, the concert turned out as an over 40-minute experience, whereas current in-game concerts rarely last more than 15 minutes. And finally, TGC's attention to player experience also seemed to overlap with a focus on inclusivity and accessibility: as Chen states, '[i]n order to enjoy a concert as someone who doesn't play games, the best intuitive thing to do is take something from the real world and take it into the virtual world, that way they don't need a tutorial to use it. So we designed the stadium around the Rose Bowl in Pasadena' (Chen, 2023-a).

This combination of factors, thus, shows that while the technical achievement of TGC with the concert was its most quantifiable outcome, it reflected a certain perspective held by the studio, which ultimately was expressed as a drive to make player experience more lifelike, inclusive and emotionally meaningful. Thus, it follows that a thorough analysis of the concert requires a look at the actual experiences of players and an attempt to gauge the effects of thatgamecompany's intents. This will be the focus of the following sections.

5.2 Engagement with a virtual community: exploring *Sky*

My interaction as a researcher with the players of *Sky: Children of the Light* became extremely relevant to this case study because it generated, on top of very significant data on inclusivity in the virtual concert, data that speak very loudly about the ethos of this community: it was shown to be extremely socially proactive and inclusive to me as a researcher.

The starting point of my relationship with this community was social media research: I tracked down a relevant forum on Reddit (the subreddit r/SkyChildrenOfLight) and posted a public call for participants. The result was outstanding: the post generated dozens of replies, some with longer comments which detailed the emotional experiences of respondents with the concert, some which identified the respondent as willing to speak more in private, and some which actively invited me to take a fuller part in the community surrounding the event.

When I wrote my original post, I was missing one key piece of information. I knew, from reading Chen's interviews, that the concert had been publicly available over the month of December 2022, after which it had been closed (thus following the movie screening model outlined in the Introduction). What I did not know was that thatgamecompany had made available for a limited time span a purchasable in-game item (called *Wings of Aurora*), which would allow players to keep accessing the event even after the public availability period had ceased. I was informed by the community about this item, and that it could be combined with the game's built-in mechanics of holding hands, which allows players to travel together over the virtual map of *Sky*. The result of this combination was that players who had not been able to go to the concert or buy the exclusive item by December 2022 could still access the event, as long as they knew someone who had.

At least six different players offered to take me to the concert. One caveat about simply going to the concert, however, was that since it was no longer openly available, the sessions now tended to be significantly emptier than the ones in December: for instance, if I were to attend the concert at a random time with any of the respondents who had offered to take me, the virtual arena would most likely be empty, and there would be no chance to fully experience the in-game crowd mechanics developed by thatgamecompany. This factor led to yet another layer of community integration among fans of the game: as some comments indicated, players had assembled in a Discord server called Aurora 2.0, in which they organised monthly trips to the concert arena, with the intent of collectively experiencing the event and making use of the crowd mechanics. This included, among other features, a system that was dubbed 'Uber', to connect players in possession of the Wings of Aurora with players who wished to go but had no means to do so.

After joining the Aurora 2.0 server, I found out that there were two upcoming collective trips to the concert: one on the 6th of May and another on the 3rd of June 2023. I began to get acquainted with the game

in preparation for the event and was able to experience first-hand much of what I had read about it. *Sky*'s aesthetics and mechanics mainly target enabling friendly and non-violent interactions between players. On multiple occasions I was approached and befriended by other players, who would sometimes just start a conversation, and on other occasions offer help with the game's internal quests.

Towards the date of the first concert, I began to explore the Aurora 2.0 server. My experience with this aspect of the community felt significantly less accessible than what I had experienced so far, not because the users were less friendly or receptive, but because the internal organisation of the server relied on a partly automated system which required some specific literacy to navigate. Even being acquainted with video games and social media, I did not find it easy to secure my ride to the concert. I was, however, eventually able to join the group of a player who had the Wings of Aurora and had volunteered to be an Uber on the concert date. We befriended each other, and approximately one hour before the concert we met in-game, from which they took me and a few other players to the concert arena.

Within the arena, I got a first glimpse of what the crowd mechanics developed by thatgamecompany meant. Most avatars of other players appear to the users as very low-detail figures, with just a featureless white head and a coloured cape. The exception to this are the avatars who share the virtual row in which the player decides to sit (who appear with full visual details and interactive capabilities, just as they would in normal game instances), and the trade-off is that the player can see their character surrounded by many low-detailed avatars and know that each of those is being controlled in real time by another human being. As expected, the concert arena was far from reaching its full capacity of 4,000 players (see: figure 5.3). I did, however, get the sense of being surrounded by at least a few hundred, which was very different from the experiences I had had so far with any other online video game.

Figure 5.3: screenshot of my incursion in Aurora's concert shows my avatar (bottom) surrounded by others.

My console suffered a technical glitch shortly after the concert started, causing me to be kicked out of the arena. I was unable to experience the concert and decided to try again on the following opportunity, on the 3rd of June. I had to go through a very similar process on the Discord server to find an Uber to the concert arena (though this time the process was even *more* automated and less friendly to newcomers) and was eventually able to join the concert arena once more. This time, the player who took me to the venue communicated more actively with me to make sure that I was able to take part on the concert, and I ended up having my avatar sit alongside them and their friends. There was no technical glitch this time around, and I was able to experience the concert through the end.

While there was very little textual communication, the experience of crowd mechanics was indeed the biggest inducer of social interaction during the concert. I was once more able to feel surrounded by hundreds of other players and got the chance to experience first-hand a system of reactions that had been implemented by TGC in the concert instances of the game, which allowed some refinement to the communication between players while in this crowd state. Every player had access to a matrix of four simple emotional animations which could be triggered at any moment into the concert, including a smiling face, a crying face, a heart and a star, all of which hung above the avatar's heads for a few seconds when activated. This feature added to the experience an aspect of crowd interaction which felt very similar to

being the member of a large crowd in a real-life traditional concert, by allowing the audience of the concert to behave collectively around it. For example, at some points of the event Aurora's avatar would say words like 'it's okay to cry', leading most of the players to simultaneously trigger the crying face reaction (see: Figure 5.4). In other moments, similar collective reactions would be triggered by musical or visual elements during the songs instead of explicit verbal cues. Thus, in the same way that within a physical crowd it might often be impossible to distinguish the voices or faces of people around oneself while also interacting with them via waves of collective reaction (such as clapping, singing along or raising small sources of light), the experience with Aurora's concert succeeded in enabling the feeling of pertaining to a crowd while allowing very little direct communication between crowd members.

Figure 5.4: screenshot of my incursion in Aurora's concert shows a wave of emotional reaction. Each crying face was triggered by one individual player.

From a creative standpoint, each song was accompanied by intricate visual and movement-based elements which complemented the experience and were even further enhanced by the crowd mechanics: for instance, during most songs all players' avatars were transformed into one kind of animal (including: jellyfish, doves, manta rays and butterflies) and allowed to fly around the virtual arena. This often generated a visual aspect similar to a cloud that kept following the artist's avatar as she sang, and led to interesting reflections when paired with the notion that each particle in that cloud was being controlled by a human being.

Overall, thus, the concert felt successful in its goal of promoting a deeply emotional experience, while also enabling the feeling of being connected to a large group of people. As the experience ended, a message on the screen informed me that I had shared it with 512 other players. A mark far below the arena's maximum capacity of 4,000 as established by TGC. Nevertheless, the attendance of this experience was a testimony to TGC's success in implementing crowd mechanics in the game and to the Aurora 2.0 community's success in collectively organising to make deliberate use of them, both of which corroborate the vision expressed by Jenova Chen across his interviews. On the other hand, it must be taken into consideration that despite this generally inclusive disposition from both designers and community, the outcome is nevertheless worth being questioned: from the company's perspective, prolonged access to the concert was shown to be linked to a marketing and monetization strategy, which inevitably raises the issue of socioeconomic exclusion (as pointed out by Castle et al., 2022), whereas from the community's perspective it seems safe to hypothesise that the Aurora 2.0 initiative has some exclusory potential due to its inner technical functioning. Both issues will be further discussed in the following sections, alongside other points of criticism that were raised by regular players of the game.

Having a sense of my general experience with the game, concert and community surrounding them, it now becomes crucial to shift the focus to what was directly expressed by the users, for a deeper and more detailed reflection on the social dynamics at play.

5.3 Main findings

The responses obtained from the original Reddit post indicated the prevalence of two main themes in the articulation of inclusivity in the concert. First, inclusion according to mental health issues: a large number of responses praised the virtual concert as a welcome alternative for players who felt excluded from traditional instances of live music due to concerns linked to autism, anxiety and susceptibility to sensory overload (interestingly, not all accounts on this front were positive, as one respondent specifically brought up anxiety and sensory overload to speak *against* the concert's crowd mechanics and its legacy for the game, as will be discussed towards the end of this section). And second, the topic of meaningful emotional experiences and connections between players: several respondents converged in praising the interactive quality of the concert as directly linked to how significant it turned out to be for them from a social and emotional standpoint. Furthermore, other forms of inclusivity, such as inclusion according to age and cultural background were also touched on by respondents, albeit to a lesser extent. This section will be dedicated to dissecting the evidence for and the connections between each of these points.

Of the 39 respondents to the original post, 9 directly addressed health issues when speaking about their experiences with the concert, with most of them specifically touching on *mental* health issues, thus

giving rise to an interesting pattern. For example, user Amalthea-Arts stated: 'I'm autistic and have severe auditory sensory [sic] and am prone to overstimulation in complex loud environments irl like concerts', an account that seems to relate to themes also covered by users snozzlefrog ('I'm autistic, struggle heavily with socialisation, and have a very specific connection with music and reducing overstimulation'), twistyfern ('I've never been to a concert irl due to anxiety and sensory issues') and sunnyRB ('I have been to two IRL concerts in my life. Not a fan. Too much sensory overload and I don't feel safe. This virtual concert, however, was perfect'), among others. Thus, these respondents helped indicate a clear correlation between the concert and this particular form of inclusivity, with some of them strongly hinting that they saw this virtual experience as a valid substitute for 'IRL' ones: Amalthea-Arts further complemented their initial statement by writing: 'it was my very first concert I was able to attend that felt *real,* and I know it was the closest I can get to experiencing one for real'.

This pattern becomes even more interesting when observed from a comparative perspective: the community analysed in Chapter 4 did not give any indication of articulating this specific strand of inclusivity (though it would be naïve to assume that there is no inclusion according to mental health issues being articulated in *Minecraft* festivals), so *why* are these indicators so clear when it comes to Aurora's concert in *Sky: Children of the Light*? Based on what was discussed in the previous two sections, one key hypothesis can be raised: thatgamecompany's alleged focus on accessibility, combined with the non-violent ethos of their game may be creating a safer and more welcoming environment for people prone to anxiety and sensory overload in comparison to other mainstream online video games. Thus, in the same way that *Minecraft* festivals were shown to be capable of strongly articulating inclusivity of transgender people (which was not at all indicated by the community around *Sky*, though it would again be naïve to assume that it does not occur), Aurora's concert in *Sky* seems to be better equipped to articulate this specific strand of inclusivity in comparison to its counterparts, due to the specific nature of the game and company hosting the event.

Another recurring theme in the responses was how the concert led players to have strong emotional experiences and, on occasion, form and strengthen bonds with one another. Some respondents who had opened their statements by addressing mental health issues went on to connect the value of their experiences to these factors, as was the case of Amalthea-Arts ('the fact I could experience it without getting overwhelmed with so many other people was incredible') and snozzlefrog ('it was ultimately such a touching, distilled example of how *Sky* can give me a sense of connection and community without requiring me to be wildly uncomfortable or sacrifice part of myself to make people happy'). They were joined by several others. For example, user MzzBlaze stated that the 'concert was the most magical experience of human synchronicity I've ever felt or been exposed to. We put hearts at the same time, we cried at the same time', whereas according to user Fallen_Ash_ (my emphasis),

> [t]he crowd feature felt as if you were connected to everyone in the crowd, an emotional wave that swept everyone! *No feelings of being left out*, with one of my favorite features being the anonymity the colored silhouettes/shapes added to the overall connected feeling' (Fallen_Ash_)

These accounts do in fact resonate with what I was able to observe in my concert incursions, and furthermore, they seem to strongly corroborate the values expressed by Jenova Chen in his interviews. The fact that several players were able to put in words the notion that the crowd mechanics implemented by TGC led to a sense of belonging indicates that the game developers were indeed successful in creating an experience conducive to social liveness, and through that, enabled a sense of relational inclusion in the event, which will be further discussed in the following section.

Other forms and articulations of inclusivity were also touched on by respondents, albeit to a lesser extent. Some form of cultural inclusion was highlighted by players who brought up being able to engage in conversation with others by using the game's translation mechanics, which again corroborates TGC's general ethos of promoting inclusive player-to-player connections. Furthermore, a few respondents reported having shared the concert experience with their children (which dialogues with Jenova Chen's declared intent of making a game that could be shared with his family), though some of their accounts pointed to this being enabled by different forms of inclusivity: while one respondent reported being unable to afford tickets for their entire family for a non-virtual concert (which was mitigated by the virtual one), another respondent pointed to an articulation of age inclusion, by stating:

> I attended the concert with my 10-year-old daughter, each logged in with our own characters, but sitting next to each other. Aurora came to concert [in our city] but it was 18+, so we were really happy to attend (sprinkles added)

Of course, while these forms of inclusivity – age and economic – seem to be broader (and therefore less likely to be a specific feature of *Sky* over its counterparts) it is interesting to note that the accounts which indicate them still revolve around the notions of human connections being strengthened by the game and concert, thus circling back to the topic of TGC's ethos and intent for this project.

It should be noted, however, that not all accounts pointed in the same direction. One respondent specifically brought up issues linked to anxiety and sensory overload to criticise the concert and what it meant for the game. While being open about not being a fan of Aurora, they stated that

> [a] lot of my crowd anxiety comes from how chaotically noisy a crowd can be. During big crowd events like this, everyone tends to be honking/emoting/talking to others (which emmits a sound + flashing bloom effect around them). If I weren't to see the bloom effect

> flashing rapidly + hear so many honking noises I would feel much better, I think (Illusioneery)

Thus, Illusioneery's account is indicating that the crowd mechanics implemented by TGC can have a prohibitive side to them, by generating a virtual environment with levels of visual and auditory stimulus that further excludes some of those prone to sensory overload instead of including them. Their stance further stems into two other forms of criticism.

The first is regarding the legacy of the concert for the game. According to Illusioneery, 'they're putting the concert crowd mechanic everywhere they can now, which causes not only sensory issues but also lag and crashes on multiple devices'. TGC's movement to make the crowd mechanics a more present feature of the game is not at all unexpected, given Chen's enthusiasm with what it meant for the company's boundaries of game development. Furthermore, both the fact and Illusioneery's worries about it were corroborated by a latter Reddit post titled 'imo sky is getting less social with the latest (and coming) changes', in which the original poster stated:

> [i]f I'm understanding correctly, TGC wants to make the game "more social" by adding these areas with ultra many players, but in the process of that, every player is becoming a faceless, bodyless blob with no interaction possible except for 4 stylized emotes. I understand it's impossible to have so many players in one server without such drastic simplifications, but I'm wondering what the point is then (m.)

Thus, both players are complaining about a tendency for crowd mechanics to become an increasingly present feature of *Sky: Children of the Light*, which is, according to them, making regular areas of the game's virtual world less welcoming to some (as per Illusioneery's account) and even less social (as per m.'s complaint), despite the company's aspirations supposedly pointing in the opposite direction.

The second critique brought up by Illusioneery refers to a lack of options in *Sky* for players to individually customise their experience (which could translate into a more widely inclusive scenario). According to them, '[a] lot of *Sky* (not just concerts) ends up being very not welcoming based on the fact that accessibility options are lackluster [sic] and the developers don't seem to do much on that aspect to include players who need them'. They further add that '[t]o make an experience like this more welcoming, I think they should just give us toggles and settings to curate the experience better based on the needs of individual players' (Illusioneery). Their stance, thus, indicates a tension between TGC's focus on inclusion and the way these values translate in reality: Illusioneery's complaints are not at all far-fetched, as it is common for video games to allow players to customise (even if lightly) their visual and auditory experiences, which (as my experience with the game corroborates) is not yet a possibility in *Sky*.

Ultimately, these critiques do not invalidate the positive accounts of people who have reported feeling included by this game and concert, but expose the fact that – regardless of the company's ethos – there is a commercial and a power relationship at play between thatgamecompany and its players. Despite all the evidence for TGC's inclusive intentions (and for the materialisation of those intentions) it cannot be disregarded that there is a high level of verticality in this relationship, which may still occasionally lead to instances of exclusion. Thus, these critiques expose a significant layer of complexity in this case. Considering this, the following section will be dedicated to analysing the findings exposed in this chapter in relation to the three theoretical lenses that guide this work: Social Dominance Theory, Social Inclusion Theory and Liveness.

5.4 Analysis

Considering all that was discussed, it becomes clear that Aurora's concert in *Sky: Children of the Light* does indeed constitute a very particular case when it comes to inclusivity in in-game concerts. A closer look at it through a theory-informed prism will help reveal *why* that is. From a liveness perspective, this concert was shown to be an extremely strong articulator of social liveness. Similarly, its achievements in terms of relational inclusion (Bailey, 2005) seem to be indisputable and directly linked to social liveness. Interestingly, there was much less indication of the articulation of other dimensions of inclusion, and considering Illusioneery's accounts it could be argued that the concert and platform promote a form of power *exclusion*. By the same token, the steep verticalization that was indicated to exist in the relationship between thatgamecompany and its players points to a complex conclusion when it comes to the articulation of hierarchy enhancement versus hierarchy attenuation (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999): the company keeps a strong position of power in relation to its users, which simultaneously allows it to act on its inclusive intentionality to great effect *and* keeps it from being fully inclusive to all of its players. This section will be dedicated to discussing each of these points.

Considering social liveness as a feeling of liveness that emerges from audience members collectively sharing a particular performance, it becomes easy to argue that this was TGC's core goal with the concert's crowd mechanics. When Chen draws a comparison between his experience with the 40-people audience in a *Fortnite* concert and being surrounded by a 30,000-people crowd in a non-virtual one, his focus is on how the experience of being part of a large crowd makes each individual feel, as a key driver to the quality of the concert experience. Due to its high subjectivity, it might be impossible to fully assess how the outcome of the player experience in Aurora's concert compares to the feeling of being in a non-virtual crowd. Most respondent accounts, however (as well as my particular experience with the concert), point to

TGC having achieved their goal on this front: one of the core drivers of the quality of Aurora's in-game concert was its ability to convey a strong sense of social liveness.

Converging with the previous point, the evidence indicates that the concert was successful in allowing most players to get a strong sense of relational inclusion from it and, more than that, allowed them to do so *because* of the strong articulation of social liveness. As Bailey (2005) puts it, the relational dimension of inclusion 'is defined in terms of a sense of belonging and acceptance'. When, for example, user Fallen_Ash_ describes that '[t]he crowd feature felt as if you were connected to everyone in the crowd', thus leading to a state where there were '[n]o feelings of being left out', this is a very clear expression of social liveness acting as a catalyst for relational inclusion, thus pointing to a level of coherence and integration between these two elements that appears to be extremely high.

The articulation of the other dimensions of inclusion proposed by Bailey (2005) was found to be much less blatant. There was little evidence for the articulation of functional inclusion, except if considering the community's spontaneous initiative to start the Aurora 2.0 server on Discord, which arguably let some users develop and employ their game- and social-media-related skills to allow a larger group of players to experience the concert. It could also be argued that the Aurora 2.0 initiative was in part an articulator of spatial inclusion, given that the barrier keeping some players to continue attending the concert after December 2022 was socioeconomical, and the server offered players an alternative to circumvent it.

The discussion on spatial inclusion gains more complexity if applied to the relationship between players and thatgamecompany. On one hand, there was evidence of players seeing the concert as a valid alternative for live music experiences they would have difficulty to afford (with the caveat that allowing free access is the rule, and not the exception, among platforms which offer in-game concerts, making this articulation of inclusion a trait of in-game concerts in general and not a feature of this particular one). On the other hand, it cannot be overlooked that prolonged access to the concert was – from the company's perspective – necessarily linked to a commercial relationship: even if the game allows players with the Wings of Aurora to take others to the concert, an initiative such as Aurora 2.0 necessarily relies on a number of players having spent money on the platform to gain access to something that is exclusive, and so by definition potentially exclusory. The point here is not to villainise TGC, but it must be addressed that this situation necessarily throws light on a tension between the company's inclusive orientation (which was shown to be true and successful to a certain extent) and its commercial relationship with its users: its business model keeps it from being able to fully articulate spatial inclusion.

On the same note, it can be said that not only power inclusion does not occur in this case, but the company likely articulates a form of power *exclusion*. The points raised above regarding spatial inclusion, combined with the complaints discussed in section 5.3 with regards to a lack of attention by TGC to the needs of some players show, above all, that this is a vertical relationship, where players have little-to-no input on how decisions are made: the offer of an inclusive ethos and mechanics comes from the top,

prompting players to embrace what they are given. This also generates a complex situation with regards to the articulation of hierarchy enhancement versus hierarchy attenuation: while the product put out by TGC may be causing some level of hierarchy attenuation (for example, by allowing people prone to anxiety and sensory overload to partake in a communal activity from which they might otherwise be excluded), the *offer* of the product itself is inevitably made from a top-down, hierarchy-enhancing perspective, with game developers constituting the in-group and players the out-group.

In sum, the complexity of this concert seems to lie on the fact that thatgamecompany's success in articulating inclusion at a huge scale comes from a combination between an inclusive ethos (which indicates hierarchy attenuation) and a commercial mass-scale business model (which indicates hierarchy enhancement): while the former seems to allow it to create a more inclusive and socially meaningful event than others with similar business models, the latter seems to keep the company from unleashing its full inclusive potential. There seems to be a trade-off at play: quality of inclusion for scale at which it occurs. Nevertheless, TGC's achievements with this concert are unique precisely for their combination of an inclusive orientation and a large scale, and thus constitute a key chapter in the history of in-game concerts.

6. Case Comparison and Further Reflections

The previous two chapters were dedicated to looking in depth into two separate – and clearly distinct – instances of the history of in-game concerts: the scene of *Minecraft* festivals and Aurora's concert in *Sky: Children of the Light*. And while each of these cases has proven to be interesting, it becomes crucial, for a fuller understanding of the phenomenon of in-game concerts, to apply a more distanced gaze over them, allowing for the identification of crucial patterns linking the two, as well as their most striking differences. This chapter will, thus, be dedicated to comparing the results obtained from both case studies, with the aim of drawing out the most important lessons that can be learned from them regarding the articulations of inclusivity in in-game concerts. This will lead, in section 6.3, to a wider reflection, connecting the main points raised to the history and reality of in-game concerts as a broader category of entertainment.

6.1 Fundamental differences: institutional status and material conditions

The most striking difference between the cases explored in Chapters 4 and 5 refers to the institutional status of the organisers behind each case. On one hand, Open Pit was shown in Chapter 4 to be a fully independent group, often expressing a hierarchy-questioning worldview and even, at times, seeking to actively avoid being seen as a structured organisation. This set the tone for the groups who carried Open Pit's torch, making *Minecraft* festivals become strongly associated with an underground and DIY ethos. On the other hand, it was shown in Chapter 5 that thatgamecompany, while still clearly undergoing a significant growth process, is far from being a small or un-hierarchised organisation. This fundamental disparity leads to an important discussion regarding the articulation of power in each case: a blatant difference was observed in the articulation of power inclusion (Bailey, 2005) between the two platforms, which inevitably leads to differing dynamics with regards to the core concepts of Social Dominance Theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) as well. Furthermore, the technological differences between *Minecraft* and *Sky: Children of the Light* seem to have borne important consequences for the way attendees experienced social liveness in each platform. This discussion becomes relevant here because thatgamecompany's technological achievements are inherently linked to its corporate status, which makes their disparity with *Minecraft* festival organisers even more evident. And while the topic of social liveness also provides evidence of similarities between the two cases (which will be further explored in section 6.2), it becomes important to acknowledge that the way it was achieved in each was not entirely the same. This section will be dedicated to covering each of these points, ultimately leading to a reflection on the differences between the two case studies and the biggest platforms in the ecosystem of in-game concerts.

It becomes crucial to start by contrasting the evidence on the differences in institutional status between thatgamecompany and the *Minecraft* festival organisers. Despite having sustained the discourse of deliberately creating inclusive and emotionally meaningful experiences with their games (which was indeed corroborated by several player accounts discussed in Chapter 5), the evidence makes it undeniable that thatgamecompany also operates according to a corporate and profit-seeking ethos. This evidence ranges from general information on the history of the company, such as the fact that it was able to secure external investment of US$160 million in March 2022 (Chen, 2022-b) to keep investing in *Sky*, which is a monetized platform, to very specific details on the Aurora concert case, such as the fact that access to the concert after its premiere season was mediated by a purchasable in-game item. As was shown in Chapter 5, this does not necessarily imply that TGC's inclusive orientation is any less genuine, and in fact there was some evidence of synergy between these two facets of the company, with TGC's investment in a new technological paradigm to allow for mass-scale interactions between players constituting the most blatant example of this. On the other hand, however, the scene of *Minecraft* festivals seemed to be deeply interwoven with a sense of active denial of corporate values. While, as Gordon (2019) puts it, Open Pit's events were built on 'digital infrastructure and real estate' borrowed from Microsoft, the group itself took over a year to adopt an institutional, public-facing persona (Schramp et al., 2020), which evidences its clinging to a more hierarchy-questioning – and less commerce-oriented – set of values, and seems to have decisively influenced Open Pit's successors, such as Trans Music. And while it was shown that some *Minecraft* events were monetized via purchasable in-game items, it was also demonstrated that this was aimed at fundraising for various charities, mostly ones linked to the LGBTQIA+ community and causes. Thus, despite an apparent convergence between thatgamecompany and *Minecraft* festival organisers regarding their inclusive orientations, an obvious difference was observed in the ways these initiatives are organised. This translated into disparities in the way inclusivity was enacted in each case, and most importantly, into a clear opposition in the way the power dimension of inclusion (Bailey, 2005) was articulated.

Due to its hierarchy-questioning ethos, the scene of *Minecraft* festivals was shown to strongly articulate a sense of power inclusion for those who partook in it. A very significant portion of what made these events inclusive came precisely from the fact that people linked to marginalised communities were taking control of them, to the point of creating obvious tension with the conservative values defended by the creator of the platform they were hosting their events in. This ultimately allowed for the creation of groups such as Trans Music, and led to a strong correlation between the inclusivity in *Minecraft* festivals and a sense of these events and communities acting as protective bubbles, capable of articulating inclusion by excluding discriminatory behaviour. This is also very clearly explainable from the perspective of Social Dominance Theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999): by strongly articulating the power dimension of inclusion, the *Minecraft* festival scene promoted hierarchy-attenuating action, essentially giving out-groups the power to create virtual spaces that operated according to their own rules and values. In this specific case, this was

shown to also create bridges to the articulation of relational inclusion, as this relative ‘change in the locus of control’ (Bailey, 2005) allowed for a heightened sense of community within the scene of *Minecraft* festivals.

And while Aurora’s concert in *Sky: Children of the Light* was also shown to be a strong articulator of relational inclusion, the path towards this was very different, with no evidence observed of a correlation with power inclusion. Instead, it was demonstrated through complaints of some players about the game’s functionalities that there is a very clear separation, in *Sky*, between those who use the game and those who make the decisions about it, which was shown to be directly linked to thatgamecompany’s corporate ethos and primarily commercial relationship with its users. It was argued that this fundamentally translates into an articulation of power *exclusion*, where the company (as an in-group) solidifies and maintains its dominance over the decision-making processes, while actively excluding the players and concert attendees (as an out-group) from them. Even if the company uses this to enact an inclusive view and intentions according to others of Bailey’s (2005) dimensions, it becomes undeniable that, at this specific level, TGC’s relationship with its users is clearly verticalized, and thus carries a high exclusory potential.

Thus, it becomes clear that, despite sharing inclusive values and intentions, the difference in institutional status between thatgamecompany and the *Minecraft* festival organisers leads to a fundamental disparity when it comes to the articulation of the power dimension of inclusion: while the underground and hierarchy-questioning nature of *Minecraft* festivals allows them to articulate power inclusion by creating an internal shift in decision-making processes, the corporate and verticalized ethos of TGC leads to power exclusion, by locking players out of those same processes even when they have relevant complaints about their experiences with the game and concert. This indicates that no general rule about in-game concerts can be extracted from this specific aspect of the comparison, with one important caveat: in both cases, the analysis of the power dimension of inclusion helped expose complexities ingrained in the wider narrative of inclusion. While in *Minecraft* festivals there was evidence of organisers deliberately excluding certain types of behaviour to create safe spaces for their target populations (such as in the case of the transphobic user related by Nia), in thatgamecompany’s case there was an indication that what causes power exclusion in one hand is also what allows the company to articulate other forms of inclusion at mass scale on the other. Thus, the juxtaposition of these cases from this perspective seems to point to an underlying theme of inner contradictions in the articulation of inclusivity in in-game concerts.

Besides the issue of power inclusion, the topic of technological limitations and social liveness also provides a fertile ground to discuss the biggest differences between the two analysed cases. As was shown in Chapter 4, *Minecraft* festivals suffered with a severe lack of optimisation for activities as collective as in-game concerts, with the possible solutions to this being either making the festivals glitchy gatherings with large numbers of players or smooth-running events with reduced amounts of people. On the other hand, it was discussed in Chapter 5 that Aurora’s concert in *Sky: Children of the Light* represented a turning

point for thatgamecompany (and arguably for the wider history of in-game concerts as well), as it pushed the studio to develop virtual crowd technologies which allowed up to 4,000 players to share the in-game concert experience in real time.

This clearly circles back to the material and institutional differences between the lead organisers in each case. While the limitations faced in the case of *Minecraft* festivals were ultimately determined by the base-game (and while it can be easily hypothesised that Microsoft would have been able to work around such limitations if it wanted to), the fact that these events were conducted by independent groups with limited power to manipulate the platform's possibilities seems to have helped dictate their lack of optimisation for crowd interaction. In other words, events such as virtual concerts and festivals were not originally intended for *Minecraft*, making the platform inherently lacklustre for them. And because the organisers of *Minecraft* festivals were not (and were not associated with) the owners of the platform, the solutions available to them to make the experience more interactive and conducive to social liveness were limited, thus leading to irregularities in the experience such as the ones pointed out by Park (2018). This is the opposite of what happened with Aurora's concert in *Sky: Children of the Light*, which was idealised and executed by the company behind the platform. The most relevant aspect of this case is TGC's active engagement in creating and implementing their crowd mechanics, which denotes a combination of intentionality and materiality: this not only suggests that there were more resources available in this case (in sheer terms of money and human labour), but also that there were the ability and disposition to tamper with the game and *make it* optimised for the virtual concert. And even if Open Pit and their successors wanted to achieve something similar (which is not far from the realm of possibility), they would hardly be able to.

However, if this aspect of the comparison helps make the differences between Aurora's virtual concert and *Minecraft* festivals even clearer, it also leads to an important reflection regarding the wider history of in-game concerts. As was discussed in this section, the biggest difference between these two cases lies in the institutional status of the organisers. It was also shown in Chapter 5 that Aurora's concert (and the mechanics it debuted) stemmed from a critique not of *Minecraft* festivals, but of the biggest commercial in-game concerts, namely Travis Scott's 2020 concert in *Fortnite*: Jenova Chen specifically brings up the feeling of being surrounded by a 30,000-people crowd in a non-virtual concert, and criticises Travis Scott's *Fortnite* concert for not being able to replicate that experience (Chen, 2023-a). This becomes interesting because, unlike the comparison between TGC and *Minecraft* festival organisers, which reveals the disparity between a structured company and independent groups, the comparison between TGC and Epic Games (which is in charge of *Fortnite*) shows two organisations who converge in their status as structured, commerce-oriented companies, with the latter far surpassing the former from a quantitative standpoint: while thatgamecompany announced in 2022 that *Sky: Children of the Light* had been downloaded 160 million times since its 2019 launch (Chen, 2022-b), *Fortnite* reached 350 million

downloads in 2020, and is estimated to have surpassed 500 million as of 2023 (Active Player, 2023). The company behind *Fortnite* most likely had the resources to develop social technology similar to what thatgamecompany did for Aurora's concert. And yet, all of its in-game concerts function in a fashion similar to Open Pit's festivals from the crowd interaction standpoint: even when there were millions of players simultaneously experiencing a *Fortnite* concert (as was the case for Travis Scott, Marshmello and Ariana Grande), they were divided in multiple servers with no more than a few dozen players each. The same applies to the other major player in the in-game concert ecosystem, *Roblox*, which has been organising virtual musical events since 2020. Furthermore, Moritzen (2022) indicates that *Fortnite* concerts are even *less* conducive to social interactions than *Minecraft* festivals, which likely applies to *Roblox* as well. The question that stands, then, is: why did it take until Aurora's concert in *Sky: Children of the Light*, in late 2022, for the boundaries of social interaction in in-game concerts to be challenged? If it was purely a matter of resources, the shift that occurred when *Fortnite* and *Roblox* took the lead of in-game concerts from independent *Minecraft* festivals would be expected to cause a much bigger impact in this aspect. And furthermore, what is the significance of this for a wider understanding of the social power of in-game concerts?

There is no definitive answer for these issues within the scope of this research. However, the evidence analysed so far seems to suggest that an effective discussion of them necessarily circles back to the topic of intentionality: differences aside, *Minecraft* festival organisers and thatgamecompany seem to share an active concern for making their events inclusive and conducive to a sense of community between attendees, which was shown to be a core motivator for the advancements promoted by TGC. Thus, in order to achieve depth in this debate (which will be the goal of section 6.3), it becomes important to also acknowledge the main similarities observed between the two case studies in this dissertation. This will be the main goal of section 6.2.

6.2 Key similarities: socially driven concerns

If, as discussed, the key differences between the two analysed cases lie in the institutional and material conditions of the organisers, their biggest similarities lie in the active employment of inclusive intentionality and the purposeful use of virtual technologies for social goals. In both cases, there were clear examples of those who were idealising and executing the virtual events utilising the resources they had at their disposal (however different these may have been *between* the cases) to promote socially meaningful experiences for their attendees. This comes with two important consequences. First, in both cases there was evidence of a strong articulation of social liveness, even if TGC's attempt at it appears to have been far more refined than what was observed in the case of *Minecraft* festivals. And second, both cases also

demonstrated a strong articulation of Bailey's (2005) relational dimension of inclusion, albeit via different pathways, as previously mentioned. The following will be dedicated to discussing each of these points, which will feed back into the wider debate that was raised by the end of the previous section, to be properly addressed in the final segment of this Chapter.

Evidence of inclusive intention and a purposeful use of technology was found, for both cases, in the public discourse of the organisers as well as in first-hand accounts and experience of the concerts themselves. In the case of *Minecraft* festivals, Gordon (2019) describes how the core members of Open Pit were willing to overtly create tension with the racist and LGBTQIA+-phobic values defended by Markus "Notch" Persson, the creator of *Minecraft*, while also highlighting the use of LGBTQIA+ colours and symbols in Fire Festival. This was shown to be complemented by Open Pit's longstanding partnership with 100 gecs, as well as their active support of pro-LGBTQIA+ charities via fundraising action, ultimately allowing for a fertile enough environment for the creation of groups such as Trans Music. Furthermore, this entire trajectory was demonstrated to be interwoven with a rhetoric of utilising the virtual setting of *Minecraft* to add layers of direct attendee-attendee interaction to the musical experience: Low Poly's mention of 'dancing' in the *Minecraft* server and Nia's enthusiastic comparison between destroying the virtual scenario and joining a mosh pit help corroborate this.

Sky: Children of the Light was shown to follow a similar path. It was demonstrated that the emotional content of TGC's games has been a priority for the company since long before they released *Sky* in 2019, with Jenova Chen specifically pointing out that he aimed to make the game meaningful and inclusive to players across a wide range of ages and cultural backgrounds (Chen, 2022-b). Evidence of this view being enacted was found while engaging with the game, for example in the fact that it steers from violent mechanics and encourages cooperation and positive social connections between players. Furthermore, as was already indicated in the previous section, when it came to Aurora's in-game concert there was an active concern for making the experience socially impactful for players, which ultimately led to the development of the crowd mechanics discussed in Chapter 5: thatgamecompany pushed the boundaries of how many players were allowed per game room during the concert, and was (judging by the accounts collected from players and first-hand experience of the event) successful in creating a socially interactive experience, with many traits that were resembling of non-virtual, mass-scale concerts.

Despite the differences discussed in section 6.1 (and especially despite the technical limitations that were pointed out for *Minecraft* festivals in particular), in both cases this combination of factors was shown to lead to a strong articulation of social liveness. Here, it becomes crucial to reiterate that, despite unequivocally being examples of in-game concerts, *Minecraft* festivals and Aurora's concert operated in very different systems. On one hand, *Minecraft* festivals were based on unique music sets being streamed, without any expectations that those same sets would ever be livestreamed again (even if they were all pre-recorded for technical convenience), while the attendees often had the chance to interact in real time with

avatars being controlled by the artists. On the other hand, Aurora's concert was based on a combination of pre-recorded music and pre-programmed visual and haptic elements that were *expected* to repeat periodically. This dichotomy can be summarised by stating that, while *Minecraft* festivals gravitated towards a more traditional concert-like model, Aurora's concert followed a logic more akin to that of a film being screened: even considering that both had pre-recorded music sets, the former involved a more obvious level of live performance than the latter. This reflection bears important consequences for the issue of liveness, as, being based on potentially unrepeatable interactions between the artists and attendees (as evidenced, among other factors, by the user who reported being able to take a '*Minecraft* selfie' with Laura Les during Lavapalooza), *Minecraft* festivals had the possibility to convey a layer of liveness that was simply not available in the case of Aurora's concert: by accessing the streamed sets during their only official 'live' execution and occasionally having the chance to encounter and interact with the artist's avatars within the game, *Minecraft* festival attendees were able to experience some level of temporal liveness (by listening to the music as the artists were making it publicly available) and even a virtual form of spatial liveness (by sharing the virtual space of the venues with the avatars of the artists). That being said, it remains clear that the leading factor of the quality of experience – in *Minecraft* festivals as well as in Aurora's concert – was the successful articulation of *social* liveness.

As discussed in the Literature Review chapter, the notion of 'social liveness' was distilled from a debate between Auslander (2008) and Couldry (2004) and taken to refer to the feeling of liveness during a performance situation emerging primarily from a sense of co-spatiality and co-temporality *between audience members*, as opposed to the interactions between audience members and the performing artists. It was argued that this could lead to a heightened sense of belonging, caused by the collectively shared experience of the performance. And, in different ways, evidence of this being a crucial factor for the quality of in-game concerts was indeed observed in both analysed cases. For *Minecraft* festivals, indications of the importance of social liveness go as far back as Open Pit's original event, Coalchella: for instance, Low Poly's attempt to convince potential attendees that the true value of the festival was in joining others to 'dance' in the *Minecraft* server (even if there was the possibility for them to just access the audio streaming) dialogues very clearly with this notion. Furthermore, Park (2018) helps corroborate this when, in his extensive account of the festival, he remarks that the biggest downside of the technical limitations faced by Open Pit was that it occasionally caused the server to have fewer players interacting in real time, which hindered the quality of the event experience even if it did not affect his direct experience of the music itself. Finally, accounts such as Nia's description of Trans Music members engaging in destroying the virtual scenario at the end of festivals help give tangibility to the notion that there was a direct link between the avatar-based nature of *Minecraft* and a sense of collective interaction which took the events beyond the sheer musical experience.

In the case of Aurora's concert in *Sky: Children of the Light*, it is very clear that being able to strongly articulate social liveness in a virtual medium was among the core goals of TGC. And not only were they able to increase the quantitative boundaries of the concert experience, but the evidence indicates that they were successful in adding a significant dose of quality to the sense of social liveness during the event, ultimately contributing to make players more socially connected to one another over the concert. This is clearly exemplified by the implementation of a simplified emote system, which allowed players to manifest their emotional reactions to others, at times leading to cascade effects where most members of the crowd would be reacting in the same way, in a similar fashion to what often occurs in non-virtual concerts.

There are two most noteworthy points about the articulation of social liveness in these cases. The first is that, as already indicated, there was a clear difference between them regarding the refinement and optimisation of mechanics, which, however, does not seem to have seriously impacted the *importance* of social liveness for each. In the case of *Minecraft* festivals, there was plenty of evidence of attendees and organisers acknowledging the imperfection of the experience, for example when one attendee of Lavapalooza stated that 'the server moshpit was running at a solid 2 fps', which betrays the notion that in these events the player-to-player interaction was often glitchy and rough. This does not seem to have been the case for Aurora's concert in *Sky*, with most attendee accounts rather constituting evidence of the smoothness and interactivity of the experience. And yet, both cases seem to converge when it comes to the importance of social liveness for their success, regardless of the quality level to which it was articulated. For instance, Park (2018) greatly associates the best moments of Coalchella with the experience of being surrounded by (and corporeally interacting with) other players, which resonates with several other accounts of attendees on *Minecraft* festivals, as well as the bulk of the evidence collected on Aurora's concert. Ultimately, this seems to indicate a strong pattern for in-game concerts, indeed corroborating the notion that social liveness is among the most fundamental factors in this mode of music consumption, and indicating that in these situations attendee-attendee interactions by far surpass attendee-artist interactions in terms of importance.

The second important point refers to the correlation between social liveness and relational inclusion. It was demonstrated that in both cases there was a strong articulation of the relational dimension of inclusion (Bailey, 2005), and particularly in the case of Aurora's concert it was argued that TGC was successful in creating a deep synergy between social liveness and relational inclusion, essentially making the latter a function of the former. This is powerfully exemplified by the user who related experiencing 'no feelings of being left out' due to a sense of connection to other crowd members enabled by the mechanics implemented in the concert. Interestingly, the articulation of relational inclusion in *Minecraft* festivals followed a distinct path from *Sky*, due to a strong synergy to power inclusion and hierarchy attenuation. And yet, it must be highlighted that in both cases there was clear evidence of a sense of belonging and genuine connections emerging between players, ultimately leading to the formation of secondary communities, in the aftermath

of the events, to prolong their positive social effects: Trans Music and Aurora 2.0 clearly exemplify this. Furthermore, even if the articulation of relational inclusion in *Minecraft* festivals differed from what was observed in Aurora's concert due to the correlation with power inclusion, it cannot be overlooked that it *also* was shown to keep a correlation to the social liveness enabled by the virtual medium. Thus, the two cases seem to, once more, converge and indicate a potential pattern for in-game concerts as a wider category: by rooting themselves in the interactions between attendees (which leads to social liveness), these events demonstrate a considerable power to lead them to a sense of belonging and social connections. And this becomes particularly relevant when the combination of these positive social effects with the layer of safety enabled by the virtual medium makes in-game concerts attractive to communities that would fall under Sidanius & Pratto's (1999) definition of 'out-groups': LGBTQIA+ people, in the case of *Minecraft* festivals, and people prone to sensory issues, in the case of Aurora's concert in *Sky: Children of the Light*. Ultimately, the fact that these articulations of inclusivity were found indicates that many other groups and articulations of inclusivity are likely to be found with wider and deeper studies focused on the topic of in-game concerts. This conclusion, however, comes with one important caveat.

As was discussed in the beginning of this section, the fundamental similarity between the two cases is the fact that organisers in both demonstrated a *purposeful* use of technology and an active concern for social issues within their virtual events. This makes it very clear that the conclusion drawn about the social and inclusive power of in-game concerts can only be generalized if talking about their *potential*. In other words, what seems to have been crucial for the successful articulation of social liveness and different forms of inclusivity in both cases was a combination of the technological possibilities brought by the virtual medium with a strong inclusive intentionality from organisers: the technology alone seems to be far from enough to produce such effects. This can be observed in the fact that, even with their strong convergences, the form and extent to which inclusivity was articulated in each case was very different. Therefore, it becomes likely that in the hands of organisers without such active concern for the social use of virtual technology, in-game concerts may offer a severely reduced power for inclusion, despite their potential pointing in the opposite direction. With this reflection in mind, the following section will aim to link the lessons learned from these case studies to a broader horizon.

6.3 Further reflections: the social power of in-game concerts as a wider category

So far, this chapter has demonstrated that the key differences between the two analysed cases stem from the institutional and material conditions of the organisers, whereas their key similarities lie in a shared concern for making the virtual concerts socially meaningful for participants. Furthermore, it has been made clear, over Chapters 4 and 5, that the key relevance of *Minecraft* festivals was inaugurating the current trend

for in-game concerts in 2018, whereas Aurora's concert in *Sky: Children of the Light* became relevant primarily for breaking new ground, in terms of social technology, in late 2022. However, as was discussed in the Introduction, between these two landmarks the ecosystem of in-game concerts was (and still is) dominated by *Fortnite* and *Roblox*. These two platforms are linked to large corporations, which dispose of resources arguably far greater than thatgamecompany's, and which, however, presented little-to-no innovation in terms of social technologies in their in-game concerts over this period. Despite their quantitative success and large number of mainstream partnerships, to this day the social experience of attending concerts in either of these platforms is arguably more comparable to what was established by Open Pit in 2018 than to what was presented by TGC in 2022, with a few dozen players per game room and no clear signs of enhancing the social possibilities from what was already established (see: Moritzen, 2022). As was stated at the end of section 6.1, this combination of factors naturally leads to the questions of why that is and what is the significance of this for the broader scenario of in-game concerts. The topic of inclusive intentionality explored over section 6.2 seems to indicate a clear path to carry out this debate. This will be the aim of this section.

It is important to start this discussion by reiterating that, despite the convergence that was observed between the two analysed cases regarding the socially driven intentions of the organisers, the evidence does not allow this to be considered an inherent trait of in-game concerts. It was extensively discussed how TGC and Open Pit articulated their similar intentions in wildly different ways: the issue of power inclusion explored in section 6.1 constitutes the biggest example of this. Therefore, considering the issue that was pointed out regarding the apparent lack of investment from platforms such as *Fortnite* and *Roblox* in socially oriented features for their in-game concerts, it becomes natural to raise, as a possible answer, the hypothesis that the organisers behind these platforms simply do not share the concern for social connections and inclusivity that was observed in the chosen case studies, which resonates with Moritzen's (2022) findings on *Fortnite*'s poor ability to stimulate the formation of a scene.

Even if in-depth analyses of concerts within *Fortnite* and *Roblox* were not conducted within this study, a superficial glance of their trajectories does seem to corroborate this hypothesis, for three main reasons. First, there seems to be a priority focus, within these platforms, in creating mainstream partnerships with artists and companies (something that admittedly was observed in TGC's partnership with Aurora, but which seems to be far more developed in these other games). For instance, while *Fortnite*'s flagship concerts involved artists such as Travis Scott, Ariana Grande and The Kid Laroi – all of whom far surpass Aurora's popularity numbers on Spotify – some of *Roblox*'s main concerts involved direct deals to make brands such as Warner Music Group and Superbowl part of the game. Second, drawing from the previous point, there seems to be a strong focus of these platforms on absolute numbers of attendees, which admittedly contributes to the overall relevance of in-game concerts, but considering what was learned with Aurora's case study, seems to mask the way these numbers are articulated from a social standpoint. It is

much easier to find information on how many people simultaneously attended Ariana Grande's, Marshmello's or Lil Nas X's in-game concerts than finding information on how these attendees were split between the game servers, or to what extent they were able to interact during the concerts, which constitutes a piece of data in itself. And third, connecting the two previous points, there is evidence that the experience of in-game concerts in these platforms is extremely irregular in quality. While, for example, Travis Scott's concert in *Fortnite* is widely regarded as a flagship case for its artistic and technical quality, several events in *Roblox* have been criticised for their low production value: Ava Max's event in September 2020 constitutes a good example of this (see: Appendix A).

While none of the points raised above constitute definitive proof, they seem to converge in indicating that the priorities of platforms such as *Fortnite* and *Roblox* regarding their in-game concerts are likely more commerce-based, taking weight away from the social concern and intentionality they could potentially apply to these experiences. However, considering that no specific case study was dedicated to either of these platforms in this dissertation, there is still room for deeper understanding of their inclusive intentionality and articulations, which constitutes a fertile avenue for further enquiry.

The second part of the problem that was posed was: what is the implication of *Fortnite*'s and *Roblox*'s apparent lack of investment in social technologies for the wider scenario of in-game concerts? The discussion above has sustained the hypothesis that these platforms have a relative lack of social and inclusive intentionality, potentially making them less capable of articulating inclusivity and social connections to the same level observed on the case studies. Here, another set of elements must be factored in. The discussion carried out in section 6.2 drew a clear thread linking the intentionality of the organisers to a strong articulation of Bailey's (2005) relational dimension of inclusion, leading to an enhanced sense of communities forming and a clear distinction of groups affected by this. Chapters 4 and 5, however, also presented evidence (albeit weaker and more diffuse) of the articulation of the spatial dimension of inclusion, which Bailey (2005:76) defines as referring to 'proximity and the closing of social and economic distances'. The evidence found on this did not seem to be directly linked to the views and intentions implemented by the organisers of the virtual concerts, but to the inherent traits of the in-game concerts themselves: by being free to access (despite being monetized via secondary means) and not requiring physical travel or presence to attend, they allowed some people to participate despite facing barriers that could keep them from attending non-virtual concerts. This did not appear to be as strong as relational inclusion in the accounts collected, but still was a factor looming in the background of the main findings in each case.

This reflection leads to the formation of a second hypothesis: that there are two possible levels of inclusivity in in-game concerts. One, deep, which leads to a strong sense of belonging, formation of communities, and seems to vitally depend on the intentions of those organising the virtual events. And another, shallower, which stems from the inherent characteristics of these virtual events and allows for the overcoming of individual barriers to participation (such as geographic location and economic status),

potentially generating a more diffuse landscape for inclusion. If this is true, it would mean that cases such as *Minecraft* festivals and Aurora's concert in *Sky: Children of the Light* are capable of articulating both, whereas platforms such as *Fortnite* and *Roblox*, if confirmed that they indeed lack the social orientation of their counterparts, would be stuck with the shallow level. However, due to their focus on absolute numbers, they would be able to articulate this shallower level of inclusivity at mass scale, thus still potentially creating positive impact for millions of people. A similar reflection applies to the issue of social liveness: while there was no evidence of investment from *Fortnite* and *Roblox* in making it deeper and more effective in their concerts, the notion that this quality naturally emerges from the sense of direct interaction between attendees during a virtual concert makes it a potentially inherent trait of in-game concerts, which can be articulated at deeper or shallower levels, depending on the intentions of the organisers. Thus, this reflection, too, constitutes a possible avenue for further investigation, which would likely require a mixed methods approach, equipped to extract meaning from the large quantitative data generated by the biggest in-game concerts.

This chapter has, thus, sought to summarise and discuss the main lessons extracted from the two case studies presented in the previous chapters, with the aim of reaching a clearer understanding of the social power of in-game concerts as a broader category of events and mode of music consumption. The task that remains is to review the investigative journey that was unfolded so far, and to enumerate the remaining questions and avenues for future research that can be drawn from this study.

7. Conclusion

This research project initially set out to investigate the phenomenon of in-game concerts by pursuing two fundamental research questions: (i) in what ways can in-game concerts affect the social experience of music consumption of their attendees; and (ii) in what ways can in-game concerts be more (or less) socially inclusive than their non-virtual counterparts. Furthermore, in the Literature Review chapter it was discussed how, despite their rise in relevance as a mode of music consumption over the past five years, in-game concerts remain severely underexplored from an academic standpoint, with little attention being paid to their functionalities and creative possibilities, let alone to their power as tools of social articulation: it was argued that works such as Moritzen's (2022) constitute exceptions, and that more analysis is required for a broader and deeper understanding of this phenomenon. Thus, this project sought to explore these research questions and gap by employing a qualitative and ethnographic set of methods and diving into two case studies: the scene of *Minecraft* festivals which was mostly active between 2018 and 2020 and Aurora's concert in *Sky: Children of the Light*, launched in December 2022.

While they represent only small segments of the wider phenomenon in question, the exploration and comparison of the selected case studies led to the observation of a host of interesting patterns, ultimately culminating in reflections and hypotheses on the social power of in-game concerts as a broad category of music consumption. The combination of Bailey's (2005) Social Inclusion Theory (specifically his definition of the power dimension of inclusion) with the core concepts of Sidanius & Pratto's (1999) Social Dominance Theory allowed for a clear visualisation of the institutional and material differences between the organisers in each case, leading to the conclusion that in-game concerts might articulate both power inclusion and exclusion, depending on how their promoters are organised. Furthermore, this perspective also helped reveal an underlying theme of contradictions in the articulation of inclusivity in the selected cases: while it was shown that *Minecraft* festival organisers were forced to actively exclude certain types of behaviour to make the virtual spaces safer and more inclusive to their target populations, it was also discussed that the factors that led thatgamecompany to articulate some level of power exclusion in Aurora's case also allowed the company to articulate other forms of inclusion at mass scale. This ultimately demonstrates the inherent complexity of the notion of inclusivity (as explored by Hayday & Collison, 2020), and allows for the formation of the hypothesis that other in-game concerts and organisers will likely present similar contradictions in their own articulations of inclusivity.

Despite the conclusion on the inherent complexities and contradictions in the articulation of inclusivity, it was also shown that the intentionality of organisers and a purposeful use of virtual technology for social goals is a decisive factor when assessing the social power of in-game concerts. Even with the profound differences they have demonstrated in institutional and material terms, the two cases were shown to deeply converge on the issue of intentionality, which also generated a convergence of results for their

virtual attendees: in both cases, strong evidence was found of the articulation of Bailey's (2005) relational dimension of inclusion, allowing attendees to form genuine connections to one another and draw a sense of belonging from their experiences, ultimately leading to the formation of virtual communities with no direct affiliations to the original organisers. This effect was also shown to be strongly linked to the inclusivity of specific populations which would fall under Sidanius & Pratto's (1999) notion of 'out-groups': LGBTQIA+ people in the case of *Minecraft* festivals (with particular emphasis on transgender people) and people prone to sensory issues in the case of Aurora's concert in *Sky* (including several self-declared autists). The discussion on intentionality also led to the notion that, while in-game concerts have a great potential for inclusivity due to their inherent technological characteristics, the full realisation of this potential necessarily depends on purposeful action from the organisers. This ultimately allowed for the formation of the hypothesis that there are a shallow and a deep level of inclusivity in in-game concerts. The former can be articulated without any targeted action and can occasionally lead to instances of inclusion that mostly relate to Bailey's (2005) spatial dimension, for example allowing people to participate despite facing economic or geographic barriers that would keep them from participating in non-virtual concerts. The latter, however, requires intentionality from the organisers and is the one most likely to lead to the effects related to relational inclusion described above. It was also hypothesised that, while there is little evidence of a socially oriented intentionality from the largest players in the in-game concert ecosystem – namely *Fortnite* and *Roblox* – they are likely to be articulating the shallow level of inclusivity at mass scale.

Finally, the concept of social liveness, which was extensively discussed in the literature review, was indeed proven to be extremely relevant for the understanding of in-game concerts. Despite the material differences between the two cases studied, both were shown to deeply rely on the direct interactions between attendees to generate the sense of liveness that justifies calling them in-game *concerts*. And particularly in the case of Aurora's concert, there was clear evidence found that its strong articulation of social liveness held a direct correlation to a sense of relational inclusion, which can lead to the hypothesis that a similar effect also occurs in virtual concerts organised within other platforms. Thus, the exploration of the research questions and gap described at the beginning of this chapter generated new perspectives and understandings on the social power of in-game concerts, and perhaps most importantly, provided foundations and highlighted further potential avenues for research, of which there are four most worthy of being mentioned.

First, the social intentions of the biggest players in the ecosystem of in-game concerts must be deeply analysed. Considering how important the socially oriented intentionality of the organisers was found to be for the deep inclusive power of the cases studied, an investigation of platforms such as *Fortnite* and *Roblox* according to this perspective, with the aim of understanding how the intentionality of these platforms interacts with the social potential of their concerts, makes itself very relevant. Directly associated with that, the second possible avenue for further research refers to the hypothesis of the existence of a deep and a

shallow level of inclusivity in in-game concerts, and how these may (or may not) interact with one another depending on the intentions and structure of the organisers.

Slightly departing from the issue of inclusivity, a third avenue for research that emerges is to focus specifically on the notion of social liveness. As was discussed in the Literature Review chapter, this concept is very diluted in the literature, and its description and full comprehension remain lacklustre. Thus, considering how relevant and useful it has proven to be for the study of in-game concerts, it becomes extremely important to seek fuller understanding not just of its effects, but also of its inner mechanisms.

And finally, the fourth avenue for enquiry that emerges from this research expands from a purely social perspective, to ask what the potential effects of the emergence of in-game concerts in the music consumption habits of their attendees are. Considering how many people they were shown to impact and how much they affect these attendees from a social standpoint, it must be hypothesised that they will also potentially have an impact on their attendees' preference for specific genres and artists, as well as on the way these people interact with other forms of music consumption, such as recorded music and non-virtual concerts. The size and shape of this impact, thus, remains to be understood.

Lastly, it must be noted that, while in-game concerts were chosen as the specific focus of this research project, they exist in a wider and fast-changing ecosystem of technological advancements and convergences between music and virtuality. Virtual concerts in environments unrelated to specific games, virtual artists with no specific correlation to non-virtual ones and the vertiginous acceleration of the development of Generative Artificial Intelligence all indicate that the convergence between music consumption and virtuality is likely to keep getting stronger over the coming years, which heightens the necessity for a continuous effort to make sense of this phenomenon as it unfolds.

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Appendix A – Database of in-game concerts (2018-2023)

#	Artist	Platform	Date	Comments
1	Coalchella Festival	Minecraft	September 2018	First event organised by Open Pit, debut of 100 gecs
2	Fire Festival	Minecraft	January 2019	
3	Marshmello	Fortnite	February 2019	Regarded as the first mass-scale event
4	Korn	Adventure Quest 3D	August 2019	First event in Adventure Quest 3D
5	Mine Gala	Minecraft	September 2019	
6	Alice In Chains	Adventure Quest 3D	November 2019	
7	Square Garden Festival	Minecraft	April 2020	
8	Travis Scott	Fortnite	April 2020	Regarded as the main flagship case in Fortnite
9	Soccer Mommy	Club Penguin	April 2020	
10	Nether Meant Festival	Minecraft	April 2020	
11	Dillon Francis; Steve Aoki; deadmau5	Fortnite	May 2020	Premiere of Party Royale
12	Blox by Blockwest	Minecraft	May 2020	Minecraft festival, not organised by Open Pit
13	Diplo; Young Thug; Noah Cyrus	Fortnite	June 2020	Part of Party Royale
14	Kenshi Yonezu	Fortnite	August 2020	Part of Party Royale
15	Breaking Benjamin	Adventure Quest 3D	August 2020	Last event recorded in Adventure Quest 3D
16	Lavapalooza Festival	Minecraft	August 2020	Last event organised by Open Pit in Minecraft
17	Ava Max	Roblox	September 2020	First event in Roblox
18	Dominic Fike	Fortnite	September 2020	Part of Party Royale/Spotlight series
19	Anderson .Paak	Fortnite	September 2020	Part of Party Royale/Spotlight series
20	Slushii	Fortnite	September 2020	
21	BTS	Fortnite	September 2020	Launch party of ‘Dynamite’. Part of

				Fortnite's 'Party Royale' series
22	Lil Nas X	Roblox	November 2020	
23	Royal Blood	Roblox	February 2021	Part of the 8th Annual Bloxy Awards
24	Why Don't We	Roblox	March 2021	
25	Kaskade	Fortnite/ Rocket League	March 2021	Part of Party Royale/Llama Rama
26	Zara Larsson	Roblox	May 2021	
27	In The Heights	Roblox	June 2021	
28	KSI	Roblox	August 2021	
29	Ariana Grande	Fortnite	September 2021	Likely the all-time recordist in total number of attendees
30	Qīshū	Roblox	September 2021	Only Chinese artist found to have participated in-game concerts
31	Twenty One Pilots	Roblox	September 2021	
32	Mohamed Hamaki	Fortnite	October 2021	Debut of the Soundwave Series, focused on international artists
33	Tai Verdes	Roblox	November 2021	
34	Tones and I	Fortnite	January 2022	Part of the Soundwave Series
35	David Guetta	Roblox	February 2022	
36	PinkPantheress	Roblox	February 2022	Part of the in-game Brit Awards party
37	24kGoldn	Roblox	March 2022	The artist acknowledges the production process of the virtual concert during the concert itself
38	Dolo Tonight	Roblox	April 2022	
39	Boris Brejcha	Roblox	April 2022	
40	Lizzo; Gayle	Roblox	April 2022	Part of the Logitech Songbreaker Awards
41	Emicida	Fortnite	April 2022	Part of the Soundwave Series
42	Charli XCX	Roblox	June 2022	Part of Samsung Superstar Galaxy

43	Gen Hoshino	Fortnite	June 2022	Part of the Soundwave Series
44	Blackpink	PUBG	July 2022	First known concert in a fully mobile game
45	George Ezra	Roblox	July 2022	
46	Denzel Curry	Roblox	August 2022	
47	Justin Bieber	Garena Free Fire	August 2022	
48	The Chainsmokers	Roblox	September 2022	
49	Lauv	Roblox & Fortnite (via iHeartLand)	September 2022	Debut of iHeartLand, a virtual space represented both in Fortnite and in Roblox
50	Charlie Puth	Fortnite & Roblox (via iHeartLand)	September 2022	
51	Aya Nakamura	Fortnite	October 2022	Last concert of the Soundwave Series
52	Aespa	Roblox	October 2022	
53	Elton John	Roblox	November 2022	
54	Mxmtoon	Roblox	November 2022	
55	Pentatonix	Roblox & Fortnite (via iHeartLand)	December 2022	
56	Mariah Carey	Roblox	December 2022	
57	Aurora	Sky: Children of The Light	December 2022	First concert in this Sky: Children of the Light. Record-holder in terms of audience numbers per server.
58	NCT 127	Roblox	January 2023	
59	The Kid Laroi	Fortnite	January 2023	
60	Fall Out Boy	Roblox & Fortnite (via iHeartLand)	February 2023	
61	Saweetie	Roblox	February 2023	Hosted in Warner Music Group's Music City, a virtual space in Roblox. Marketed as a Superbowl concert.
62	Monsta X	Roblox & Fortnite (via iHeartLand)	February 2023	

63	Theoz	Roblox	February 2023	
64	Raye	Roblox & Fortnite (via iHeartLand)	March 2023	
65	Maneskin	Roblox & Fortnite (via iHeartLand)	March 2023	
66	HwaSa	PUBG Mobile	March 2023	
67	BoyWithUke	Roblox	April 2023	
68	Chlöe	Roblox & Fortnite (via iHeartLand)	April 2023	
69	VoicePlay	PUBG Mobile	April 2023	
70	Bailey Zimmerman	Roblox & Fortnite (via iHeartLand)	May 2023	
71	Owenn	Roblox & Fortnite (via iHeartLand)	May 2023	
72	Cochise	Roblox	June 2023	