

Year of the Goblin

Tracing New Developments of Digital Folklore and Urban Modes of Living in Online Music Subcultures

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Abstract This paper sheds light on the connections between musical undergrounds and the global emergence of ‘goblin mode’ as a political aesthetic. In March 2022 *The Guardian* published an article discussing the popularity of a new locution emerging on social media: ‘goblin mode’. Characterized by a “complete lack of aesthetic” and vaguely pointing towards “the opposite of trying to better oneself”, ‘goblin mode’ was linked to embracing dishevelment, rejecting societal expectations, and giving in to the heavy consumption of junk food and digital content in reaction to the pandemic obsession for domestic and personal improvement.

Keywords Underground. Digital folklore. Bestiaries. Aesthetics. Class. Digital infrastructures. Urban studies. Music. Ethnomusicology.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Dungeon Crawlers and Dwellers: New Musical Imaginations and the Underground as a Megadungeon. – 3 The Dungeon on Tape and on the Dancefloor: A Map of Medieval and RPG Aesthetics from Dungeon Synth to Larping Partygoers. – 4 Messy, Feral, Mischievous: The Goblin from Folk Literature to Popular Culture. – 5 Low Level, Low Class: ‘Goblin Mode’ and Predicting the Future from the Megadungeon’s Peripheries. – 6 Conclusions: Life out of the Megadungeon.



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Goblins don't need to justify their cruel acts.
They're evil creatures.
(Grandpa Seth, *Troll 2*)

Move over trolls, it's goblin time!
(Charles Rushforth on *Junkee*)

1 Introduction

It is 2018. After almost ten hours of drudgery in front of my computer screen at the office where I am working, I pick up my phone and hit up a friend of mine. "Hey, what are you doing?", he answers right away: "Yo, we're in the dungeon, the usual. Come if you like". After another thirty minutes or so I move through the city and reach my friends' flat; a living space at the centre of Milan occupied by underground musicians and producers Reptilian Expo, Kakofonico and Señor Service.

Passing the unlocked door, I enter the dim lit windows-almost-shut four rooms, cavernous apartment, and hear music coming from my friends' bedroom. A voice yells at me as an echolocator device for lazy people. I enter the room: a small space with a mezzanine bed, a tiny desk underneath it and multiple shelves covering the only free wall available. The haze of pot smoke fills the air like thick mist. Tapes, instruments, books, zines, posters and other weird objects are amassed with different degrees of order around the area: a treasure room for music nerds. Señor Service is crouching in front of the desk producing new tracks, switching once in a while to Internet binging and hyperlink-hopping; his face illuminated only by the cyanotic blue-lights of the screen and a cheap table lamp. He stops the music through the keyboard's spacebar and greets me. Reptilian Expo finally enters the room as well. "What have you guys been doing?" I ask. "Nothing much really. Mainly playing music here. *Classic dungeon crawling as usual*", they answer. We move to Kakofonico's room. He is not here and his bedroom offers more space for us to hangout. In the five meters walk I notice the domestic disorder; objects that are not where they are supposed to be, unwashed dishes, weeks-old trash bags, empty pesto sauce cans collected in a corner and overflowing ashtrays. "Sorry, it's a mess", they remark; "*Goblin style*", I add sneering.

This anecdote narrating an absolutely unremarkable, ordinary snapshot of the urban life me and my circle of underground musicians were leading five years ago shows how we were employing the fantasy and role-playing game (RPG) imagery of goblins and dungeons to describe our modes of living in the city. A time in which we would leave only to meet in other shadowy, untidy apartments or dungeon-like, labyrinthine social spaces such as the defunct Macao squat or the Via Tucidide studios. Consequently, we built on the inside joke

that we were all a bunch of dungeon crawlers and dwellers moving across the urban landscape. This employment of humour to develop a personal vocabulary describing metropolitan behaviour generated citations in musical works like Reptilian Expo's album *xperiametaphone* (2019) and TMT's track "La Stanza" (2022), and even albums' concepts dedicated to this terminology such as Kuthi Jin's EP *Crawl & Dwell* (2020) [fig. 1].



Figure 1
Cover artwork of Kuthi Jin's *Crawl & Dwell*

Little did we know that in two years from the genesis of this vernacular vocabulary for underground music slackers, the goblin imagery would become a global trend when in 2022, right after the perceived end of the global COVID-19 pandemic, Internet users would choose 'goblin mode' as new Oxford word of the year (James 2022). The term, referring to "unapologetically self-indulgent, lazy, slovenly, or greedy" behavior and characterized by a "complete lack of aesthetic", vaguely pointing towards "the opposite of trying to better oneself" (Knight 2022), was associated to embracing dishevelment, rejecting societal expectations, and giving in to the heavy consumption of junk food and digital content in reaction to the early pandemic obsession for domestic and personal improvement.

As my anecdotal introduction clearly shows, this lifestyle describes how a certain circuit of underground musicians used to live years before the pandemic hit: hustling between low-wage yet demanding jobs, small bedrooms-studios in expensive dungeon-like metropolises, and free time spent binging online content. What I think is crucial in something that may otherwise seem a silly statement on how musicians often live in self-inflicted neglected conditions, is that if read through sociologist Jacques Attali's theories on music's political economy (1985), this context sheds light on why and how the endless layered structures of the Internet as a megadungeon are evolving. In this essay I will show that fantasy imagery has evolved for many underground musicians in varied and heterodox ways to communicate a perception of urban precarity and a corresponding necessity of emancipatory escapism through the convoluted, procedurally

generated structure of the Internet, which develop alongside lines of class, anticipating larger social shifts.

I will first illustrate what the goblin and dungeon imagery meant to my circle of artists through ethnographic and auto-ethnographic data. Subsequently I'll delineate how fantasy tropes link underground music to the megadungeon as a topological model. Then, I will reconnect this analysis with its larger implications to mass culture through analysing the trend and spread of 'goblin mode' while also offering an archeology of the goblin's folklore in popular culture and the Internet. After these two steps, which help us understand how such fantastic creatures relate with individuals' feelings of capitalist, metropolitan oppression and need for creativity through the Internet, I will finally use Attali's theories from his book *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* to explain how the goblin's political aesthetic is generally relevant to a world of increasing domestic confinement and internet consumption.

2 **Dungeon Crawlers and Dwellers: New Musical Imaginations and the Underground as a Megadungeon**

The terms 'dungeon crawler' and 'dungeon dweller' originate from the classic RPG terminology. The first indicates a gaming scenario defined by

Running through labyrinthine enclosed environments, defeating creatures, collecting up objects and money, solving puzzles, and unlocking doors. (Stuart 2021)

This happens in a specific enclosed space - the dungeon - provided with multiple ways of access and navigation (Broadhurst 2014). Respectively, the second term refers to the types of creatures that populate the dungeons such as goblins. The appeal of these games, *Gauntlet* and *Diablo* being perhaps the most famous examples, is their capacity to become flexible realms of the imagination, offering a narrative background and creative context providing distraction, amusement, hang with friends. For some, this hobby can even build character or teach good behavior becoming even a belief system, philosophy or, like sports or the military, a life structure (Gilsdorf 2009).

I employed and popularized such a terminology first when I found those semantics apt to describe how some of my friends never left their messy flats, accumulating musical paraphernalia; with the right amount of domestic neglect. This carelessness in fact allowed everyone to enjoy these flats as perfect spaces to explore sociality without constraining forms of domestic etiquette, thus making these places appealing hangout spots. My circle of underground musicians picked

up on these terms promptly. As producer Señor Service comments regarding the terms *dungeon crawlers* and *dwellers*:

We were trying to describe the context in which we lived and that had a certain... dark aspect to it. One of people who don't leave their homes very much and live in murky flats. Of course it made sense also with the 'dungeon' terminology given that our flat really resembled a *dungeon*. It was very dark, and goblins need darkness. We certainly resembled somewhat a bunch of goblins. It perfectly described our condition of human beings living in Milan. (WhatsApp message to Monteanni, 11 July 2023)

This kind of fantasy metaphor was informed by a shared childhood developed around activities concerning genre-specific media such as fantasy literature and movies, card games, video games and RPGs. As fellow musician and flatmate Reptilian Expo remarks:

I think that all of us were fascinated by this fantasy world. I was playing *Magic*,¹ but it could have been video games like *World of Warcraft* or *Dungeons & Dragons*.² For others it might have been *Harry Potter* or *The Lord of the Rings*. So when we moved to Milan, while living in cramped spaces, we realized how similar the people around us were to those creatures; everything clicked! And then the crawling and dwelling: being always trapped inside these smoky, stinky four walls. There was also a mobility element to it, like moving inside-outside of our *dungeons* to other *dungeons*. So, all in all, from this aesthetic of a magic and *dungeon*-like world with which we grew, it was natural for us to see the similarities in what we were experiencing; especially from the perspective of *cunicular spaces* and *goblin-like faces*. (WhatsApp message to Monteanni, 11 July 2023)

Even more fascinating is how the exploitation of a fantasy lexicon is not only functional to this joke for insiders but can be connected to larger influences adopted in other contexts of popular culture and living conditions that emerged during the Covid pandemic. In this respect electronic music producer Xàr Num's comments are enlightening:

1 *Magic: The Gathering* is a well-known and notoriously difficult trading card game about magical combat (Churchill, Biderman, Herrick 2019).

2 *Dungeons and Dragons* (*D&D* from now on) is a fantasy role-playing game first published in 1974 and nowadays the most popular among the genre.



Figures 2a-b Artwork of *Clorofellas* cassette album

For me this slang is related to larger trends regarding an emerging 'technologic middle-age', where the most surreal and grotesque extremities of our society in various artistic practices take the connotations of the characters that, in that imagery, are grotesque and surreal, like goblins and the like. I don't see this semantics as really relevant to me outside of a certain joke, though. I'm sure that for the other projects this terminology stratifies differently, although I also think that in those conceptual stratifications the fantasy imagery is just a starting point. On the other hand, the crawlers and dwellers terminology described perfectly our social groups' [mobility] dynamics. Something which during and right after the Covid lockdown we all experienced: alternating between hermit-like isolation and pure nomadism; explorations of external social ambiances and socially mixed gatherings. (Telegram message to Monteanni, 11 July 2023)

Indeed, even musicians that were linked to our circle but did not share our same social spaces and, hence, our slang, were influenced by the dungeon imagery. An example is *Clorofellas*: an Italian goblin-themed pop rap album published in 2022 by artist WOZZA [figs 2a-b]. When asked by rapper TMT about why he chose such imagery, WOZZA answered simply: "Because I live like a goblin", referring to him not having a bank account and surviving only on cash money, earning just enough to stay afloat until the next gig.

A second example emerges from an interview I made with bass music producer talpah, who had previously released an album, *HOW DID I SURVIVE?* (2021), on Kuthi Jin's label CLAM:

When I produce I am interested in communicating a narrative. Lately I think of my productions as a kind of ‘dungeon music,’ the feeling of walking through a dungeon where around every corner there might be a monster. (Monteanni 2023a)

Talpah perceives this ‘dungeon feeling’ as something that can be replicated by creating a narrative through the exposure to heterogeneous selections of obscure Internet content dug from the depths of streaming platforms such as YouTube. This is what he had to say regarding an audio-visual show he prepared with video maker and graphic designer Nic Paranoia:

I’d like people to listen to my music as they watch random videos we dug from YouTube to create a narrative: that dungeon music effect I’m looking for. (Monteanni 2023a)

A second intriguing point is how this dungeon imagination is connected by talpah to feelings of distress and anxiety in video games, where certain sinister happenings caused by technological malfunctions are represented as rooms of the RPG stone prison:

One of the tracks from my upcoming album will probably be called “The Red Screen of Death”. Do you know about it? It is when back in the days of PS2 [PlayStation 2] the screen turned to red with an ominous sound and your console seemed completely fucked. Many people on the Internet still have a strong memory of that jarring happening from when they were kids; the sensation of ending up in this room where all was doomed. Many recount how they still fall into distress when they hear that sound. Well, I’d like to recreate that feeling in relation to this dungeon-music effect. (Personal communication)

The dungeon is revisited as a technological, virtual structure joined with the practice of digging for obscure Internet content.

Even if based on the RPG imagery, all the conversations I present conjure a much more stratified and complex definition of what a dungeon can be. While Señor Service, Reptilian Expo, WOZZA and Xàr Num link this type of fantastic, middle-age themed imagination to modes of urban living at the margins of civil society, feelings that were only strengthened by the experience of the pandemic, talpah’s testimony connects musical aesthetics of the digital underground – music that “is born on the Internet, thanks to the Internet” (Monteanni 2023a) – to technological vernacular practices and their narratives. These include, in talpah’s case, unearthing obscure audiovisual content and visualizing technological malfunctions as spaces, like we have seen in the case of the ‘red screen of death’.

I argue that these commentaries outline a conception of the genre's ethos and aesthetics that parallels the structures and functions of a megadungeon, thus reinforcing the affinities between these two imaginaries. In order to prove this, first, it is useful to review the story of the underground as a concept to show how the Internet has managed to partly sustain and nurture underground music practices and thus why underground musicians living in precarious conditions are increasingly on the Internet. Thereafter, I will consider the structure and rules of the megadungeon to prove how fantasy tropes related to space and depth are a relevant model to interpret one's own experience as an underground musician living in precarious life conditions.

Theories of the underground are many and varied, representing today one of the most difficult genres to define (Monteanni, Pennessi 2022). Following Frank Zappa's seminal principle that "the mainstream comes to you, but you have to go to the underground" (quoted in Graham 2010), journalists and cultural theorists have tried to pin down a possible definition of the concept guided by ethical undertones, in order to discuss whether the term underground has lost its meaning or can still be employed as a political stance.

According to David Keenan, an author and prominent figure in the US-British scene, underground is a universe that officially came into being around the early 1990s, as an outgrowth of prior musical experiences such as Sonic Youth. Those were the years of enormous 'Do-It-Yourself' (or DIY) fervor (Keenan 2015). Critic Simon Reynolds, for one, observes how, from the late 1960s to the early 1970s, in underground prodromes, a form of equivalency or parallelism might be drawn between music and an organization with a political stance (e-mail to Monteanni, 10 December 2021).

In 2015, Keenan claimed that after more than four decades, the pseudo-movement embodied by the post-1968 cultural expansion was no longer a symbol of the subculture's DIY attitude and counter-cultural isolationism. Ultimately, what was a matter of attitude had become a matter of style, jeopardizing the subculture's purity. Simultaneously, Reynolds weighed in, claiming that the web "has extinguished the idea of a true underground; now it is too easy for anyone to discover anything" (e-mail to Monteanni, 10 December 2021).

But according to my personal experience in what I termed the digital underground following talpah's definition (Monteanni 2023b), I think that the underground is still alive on the Internet and agree with Stephen Graham (2010), who pointed out how more recently the independence afforded by the Web's endless promotional, creative and circulatory affordances have nurtured new underground circles and practices. The potentialities of the Internet alongside the democratization (Clayton 2016) and hijacking (Novak 2013) of mass-distributed, affordable consumer technologies nudged amateurs and

underground musicians to employ semi-professional and professional music production tools constituting valid alternatives to otherwise expensive, cumbersome, and esoteric technologies. Moreover, free streaming websites like Bandcamp and SoundCloud, along with non-musical, digital platforms such as Linktree, YouTube, Discord, WordPress and social networks, provided musicians with virtual stages to not only promote and sell their productions more or less directly to the public, but also to discover, exchange and collaborate with kindred artists transnationally (Monteanni, Pennesi 2022). With these tools musicians are ultimately crafting their sounds in new economically and logistically convenient ways, building scenes in the meantime; all without necessarily leaving their bedrooms (Lysloff 2003). This new, digital underground ties with precarity and the Internet's affordances in two ways: first, as musical scenes born out of the lack of performance and rehearsal spaces – a no-venue underground (de Seta 2016) – and, second, as a constellation of online, often short-lived microgenres shaped by patterns of consumption and production of Internet content (Press-Reynolds 2022).

On the one hand, as I have shown elsewhere (Monteanni, Pennesi 2022), many underground musicians' overall preference for new digital media and technology is influenced by hostile cultural and municipal policies that make it increasingly difficult for artists to access physical places. The dramatic and ongoing rise in city centres rents following the global real estate crisis (Masterson 2022), the continuous decline in revenue of independent clubs and live venues (Savage 2022), the closure and criminalization of many autonomous zones and squats (Dowling 2009), the drastic cuts to arts and culture fundings (Morrow 2022), as well as the decline in music sales and the rise of the streaming industry (IFPI 2022) contributed to the marginalisation of underground musicians. To compensate for these obstacles, artists turn increasingly to virtual, decentralized environments.

This already resonates with how RPGs are organised in virtual spaces since their invention [fig. 3]. To consider the first instance of such a structure, Multi-User Dungeon or MUD was written by Roy Trubshaw in the fall of 1978 at the University of Essex (Bartle 1990). A MUD or MOO is a text-based computer programme allowing numerous subjects to create fictional characters and navigate through a virtual internet 'place'; environments with a fantasy adventure background facilitating characters to become more powerful through virtual conflicts (Punday 2000). Specifically, online musical communities are more akin to an iteration of the program developed in 1989 by Jim Aspnes at Carnegie Mellon University and named TinyMUD (Hamurcu 2022). TinyMUD was innovative in that it focused less on combat and more on user cooperation and social, decentralised interaction through the internet (Stewart 2000). Although the social sphere and identities MUDs produced were frequently described

in exaggerated, idealistic terms as ways through which the world would have found new, more egalitarian and positive way to associate with others, many have highlighted instances in which cyberspace seemed to promise to fundamentally reconfigure the underlying parameters of human connection (Punday 2000); something that musicians from the digital underground seem to have felt compelled to experiment with.



Figure 3
Underground music festival Musa Ullakolla organized by KRAAK records and hosted on SWGBO: a cracked version of Finnish social media platform Habbo Hotel

Music genres are caverns with layers upon layers of sediment, fossils, reservoirs, eroded surfaces. Shiny rocks that dazzle the eye, icicles hanging from the ceiling with curled ends. Folds and crevices that bleed into other caverns connected by interstitial tunnels and dark streams. They're spatial and temporal - networks of musicians and aesthetic contexts that have emerged over time, some of them forming in response to media that came before them. It's practically impossible to grasp a music genre or scene in its totality, aware of every manifestation and influence, but you can dig deep in the ground and turn over as many rocks as possible. What playlists do is rub sandpaper over a music scene so there's no dimensionality left. (Press-Reynolds 2022)

If the neoliberal evolution of urban spaces pushed musicians to socialize into dungeon-like virtual spaces, on the one hand, the proliferation of '-wave', '-core', and '-punk' aesthetics has since the 2010s generated new online-based underground genres and publics such as vaporwave, seapunk and glitchcore, reflecting peculiar niche aesthetic and a group of paratextual references bearing different political and apolitical meanings (March 2022). Influenced by the Internet's capability of increasing the complexity and influence of niche market consumer networks (Broman, Söderlindh 2009, 6), the phenomenon of online microgenres has intensified and saturated on platforms such as SoundCloud thanks to the Internet as a decentralizing

device, creating more and more scenes and generating what music and online subcultures journalist Kieran Press-Reynolds has defined as musical ‘deep-Internet bubbles’: niches of musical content which you can only access if you already know where to look. Besides the insights regarding the new aesthetics of the Internet underground, these musical microgenres reveal affinities with the megadungeon’s topology. Let’s consider how Reynolds defines these online microgenres, reiterating the parallels between a group of music subcultures belonging to the online underground and spatially buried spaces in the depths of the Internet.



Figure 4 An 'iceberg chart' illustrating different depths of musical knowledge

Uniting this description with talpah's conceptions of virtual place, I argue that the already noticeable spatial connotations of the underground – something that is beneath the ground and must be dug and unearthed – have increased with the use of the Internet by the contemporary digital underground. When talking about the actors of the digital underground, the relation between Internet's labyrinthine spatiality and self-neglect become more evident when we consider the famous 'iceberg chart'. Iceberg charts have been used by Internet communities since 2011 (Spool 2016) to illustrate levels of knowledge of a given topic. In the chart the tip represents generic knowledge, whilst the submerged part represents the sum of esoteric knowledge about a specific issue. Considering the graph [fig. 4], depicting the expertise of musical works, besides the idea of spatiality and depth, what's definitely intriguing is that, such as in my friends' experience with the dungeon terminology, increased knowledge of underground music entails a condition of proportional self-neglect. A concept that parallels the design of megadungeon in that "the deeper you go, the more dangerous it is and the greater the rewards" (Broadhurst 2014).

Spatial metaphors akin to the megadungeon model and characterizing the idea of an underground become quite literal when one thinks of it in its Internet developments for contemporary musicians: artists occupying small, dungeonesque houses that they inhabit as subterranean creatures, create scenes dwelling a transnationally connected, multilayered environments made of hyperlinks, platforms and servers as secret doors, portals and procedurally generated spaces (van der Linden, Lopes, Bidarra 2014) where to find deeply buried musical treasures and spawn new musical breeds.

At the same time, some literature hints at how there is a more developed relationship between live action role-playing³ (LARPing from now on) late capitalism working cultures and the Internet's megadungeon. In a post entry on his *Interconnected* blog, Matt Webb (2022) has explained how fantasy goblin impressions in his teenage years reminded him of the LARPing occurring on LinkedIn and in offices, where people impersonate office characters and embody imagined professional personalities, often doing so through e-mails and social platforms on the Internet infrastructure. Following this lead and building on this idea and the previous Xàr Num interview, let's now consider the influences fantasy tropes had on contemporary music subcultures in order to show why the imaginary of the goblin has spread in the underground first, and only subsequently in mainstream global culture.

3 A sort of interactive role-playing game in which participants physically portray characters, often in costume and with props.

For the next section, besides relevant literature of the feudalization of society and references to a new middle-age, explaining the impact of fantasy and medieval tropes on society as a whole, I have considered recent investigations regarding how these new metaphors have reached and shaped subcultural productions and practices in fringe musical social movements, releases and events. The two different categories of the selected scenes, participants and case studies, namely RPG-themed club music and dungeon synth, have been chosen on the basis of both their widespread popularity in underground music circles and their relationship with digital means of production, circulation and participation which permitted said notoriety. Whereas the analysis of dance music with RPG aesthetics provides background information concerning the reasons behind the appropriation of the fantasy imagery by today's scene actors, the examination of the origin and developments of dungeon synth since the nineties, likely the first underground music genre inspired by fantasy artistic and literary products, will show how the employment of fantasy imagination in underground music has evolved, for some musicians, from an apolitical expression of escapism to a way of narrating the desolation of living in a world defined by violence and class disparities. Last, since the presented sources focus on European and Western-centred participants, the section only claims exhaustivity relatively to its obvious geographic limitations.

3 The Dungeon on Tape and on the Dancefloor: A Map of Medieval and RPG Aesthetics from Dungeon Synth to Larping Partygoers

Xàr Num had remarked that influences of medieval and fantasy imagery are a trend at large in society and not only in the musical ecosystem. Proof of this can be found in what has been termed as the 're-feudalisation' of the economy and politics, redubbed as digital feudalism (Arditi 2023), or as the description of late capitalism as a new dark age (Bridle 2018): a clear reference to the middle-ages as an obscurantist period of history. Talking of music in particular, journalist Günseli Yalcinkaya explained how several post-pandemic dance music parties and raves in Europe are explicitly, heavily loaded with fantasy and pagan signifiers, hosting a crowd of "ravers dressed as medieval forest dwellers" (2021) and even providing their own versions of rituals through the preparation of potions or the reading of tarots or LARPing club nights combining virtual and physical domains (Yalcinkaya 2022). These acts are an attempt at mixing "queer nerd culture and RPGs with epic sounds inspired by fantasy and folklore" (Yalcinkaya 2021) through the layered sensory overload necessary for post-Internet attention spans (Yalcinkaya 2022); a phenomenon

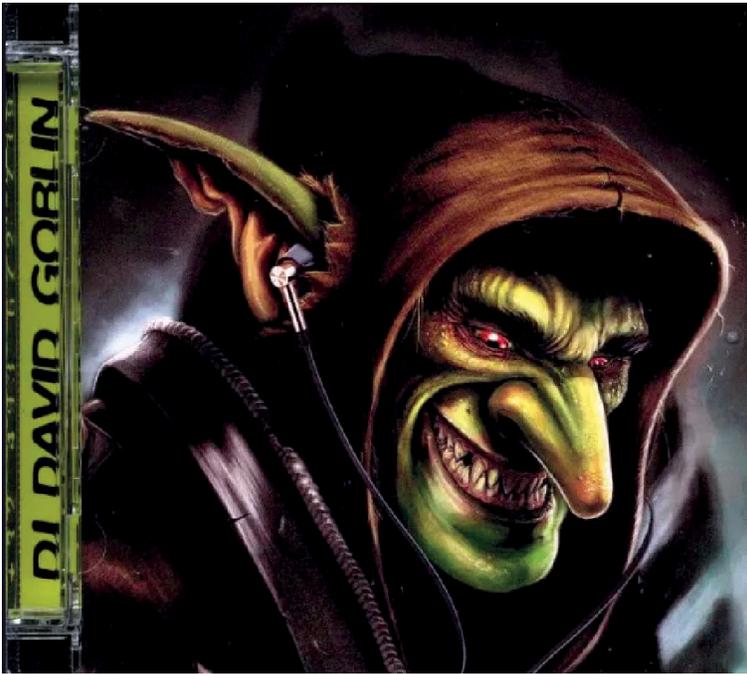


Figure 5 Cover artwork of DJ David Goblin's Orz Muzik

to which in different measures artists such as DJ David Goblin [fig. 5], CL Golem and the collective NeuroDungeon can be ascribed [fig. 6].

Of course, Neo-pagan and techno-pagan themes have been part of popular culture for decades, bringing writer Erik Davis (2015) to theorize that technology has the potential to bridge the gap between rationality and imagination. Following this premise, Yalcinkaya claims that the new rebirth of fantasy influence is founded online, via social networks such as TikTok, which use increased during the pandemic. However, the prevalence of medieval aesthetics implies a deeper pessimism about the future, implying that historical progress has stagnated and that we are now retreating to earlier, darker patterns of society. Consequently, this resurgence in electronic music suggest a communal yearning to create emancipatory fantasies through the medium of rave music letting go of the growing economic insecurity, social atomisation and the erosion of community and identities (Yalcinkaya 2021). In practice, these music fantasies aim at creating alternative realities in which it is possible to control one's narrative, reclaiming spaces individuals feel shut off from, thus echoing the theory of anthropologist David Graeber claimed in his book *The Utopia of Rules* (2015) that the present popularity of fantasy may be



Figure 6
Flyer of a NeuroDungeon
Party

a reflection of a desire for a world free of state control, or, tellingly, feminist readings and employments of the goblin as a queer or provocative icon (Pitcher 2019; Higgins 1993).

But in spite of the large influence of the dungeon imagery on nowadays' dancefloors, the most iconic example of these explorations of gloomy castles and distant epic lands still remains dungeon synth (DS from now on). DS is a kind of fantasy-born and medieval-influenced electronic music that through the usage of synthesizers, keyboards, and drum machines ranges from sparse, lo-fi solo performances on electronic keyboards to complex, hi-fi orchestral works.⁴ The style is part of the spectrum of black metal and ambient music: Hvard 'Mortiis' Ellesen, former Emperor member, a pioneer of the genre, although opposing the term DS (Kallio 2021, 9), which emerged from a post entry by Andrew Werdna on his *Dungeon Synth* blog (2011), credits Klaus Schulze, Tangerine Dream, and Kraftwerk as influences on the style. Furthermore, obvious paratextual influences are the

⁴ Rate Your Music, *Dungeon Synth*. <https://rateyourmusic.com/genre/dungeon-synth/>; Newsome 2017.

works of J.R.R. Tolkien, Scandinavian nature and mythology and wizardry (Kallio 2021).

Despite being music which, since the early nineties, has been released almost exclusively in tape format, DS has recently resurfaced in the digital realm with renewed force thanks to the reach of platforms such as YouTube and Bandcamp (Kallio 2021). Beyond the technicalities of the genre and its rise to popularity, similarly to the fantasy media we have seen so far, what captivates DS fans and artists, often self-perceived outcasts, are surely its escapist qualities. “It’s a hideout. It’s a deeply reclusive and often sad genre, Dungeon synth means you’re kind of a freak,” commented DS artist Dunkelbot in an interview with journalist Miloš Hroch (2020).

After its resurgence, similarly to what happened after vaporwave, the style has fractured in many, additional subgenres each targeting a peculiar sonic aesthetic and theme like ‘dungeon noise’, ‘dino synth’ or ‘goblin synth’ (Hroch 2020). In some cases, DS even mixed with apparently distant genres like in the case of ‘keller synth’, defined by DS proboard user ‘windgeist’ as a sound created by artist B.S.o.D in Saarland (Germany), where the main difference to DS is the heavy usage of drum kit sounds and staggeringly really raw productions, or dungeon rap, a blend pioneered by artist DJ Armok (and other aliases) of Memphis rap⁵ and DS (Wray 2023). These last two offshoots exacerbate the bleak undertones of escapism, respectively thematizing the abuse of drugs (Windgeist 2022) and the transnational feeling of depression and doom brought by political instability and war (Wray 2023).

While being still rooted in fantasy, then, the genre’s latest evolutions bring it back to the real world, sometimes taking into account political themes. But from this perspective it is particularly interesting to consider the work of DS Italian label Heimat Der Katastrophe, or HDK. Born out of the radical Milanese punk band Kalashnikov Collective, HDK has applied to DS their unique approach derived from years of punk and DIY militancy. For starters, in HDK the collective jokingly interprets anonymous employees of a namesake toy company, completely dedicated to the consumer, weaving a tongue-in-cheek narrative about games and capitalism (Perugini 2023). Even more cogently, in their release by Red Gremlin titled *The Rise of the Gazunderlings* (2021) [fig. 7] the revolution of goblins compelled to work in mines against their masters recalls the British miners’ strikes in 1984-85 (Perugini 2023).

⁵ A form of lo-fi atmospheric southern hip-hop popularized in the late 1980s and early 1990s by the likes of Three Six Mafia (Wray 2023).



Figure 7 Artwork of Red Gremlin's *The Rise of the Gazunderlings*

References to a revolutionary imagery become even starker when reading the liner notes on the album's Bandcamp entry:

In the darkest corner of the Sword Mountains, hidden in the shadow of the Icespire, lies the Kazunder Valley. Here, out of sight of prying eyes, the Faceless are overseeing the extraction of something far more precious than gold. No being in their right mind would ever set foot in these mines voluntarily and so the Faceless choose the cowardly creatures known only as the Gazunderlings to do their dirty work. ⁶

Yet the terrors in the dark are so great that even the spineless Gazunderlings are forced to rise up against their masters.

⁶ <https://heimatderkatastrophe.bandcamp.com/album/hdk-86-the-rise-of-the-gazunderlings>.

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RED GREMLIN, champion of the exploited, dungeon-synth artist in solidarity with the peoples in struggle, tells us about the tragic revolt of the Gazunderlings miners against their evil oppressors. Dedicated to the over-worked and under-paid hoi polloi of the world. 'Be patient my brothers and sisters, our time will come'.⁷

If the Red Gremlin is a clear metaphor of class struggle, looking back at RPG influences in dance music, interpretations of the goblin as a character using irreverence as a carnivalesque instrument to dismantle obstacles, power imbalances, and hierarchies by opening new liminal spaces where normal rules do not apply (Bakhtin 1984) emerge. In an interview I had with DJ David Goblin, he discusses why he chose the dungeon critter as his musical persona:

I associate Orks & Gobz with a form of constant movement, a devastating dynamic for which hard dance would be the perfect soundtrack to go to battle. [...] I didn't politicize my Musik by making it, but I do think that offering an escape from our harsh world, by creating another space, physically and mentally, is a political form in itself. [...] I've found in the irreverence and humor of the Gobz tools to make a truce with our world. [...] Like my latest release, one of the tracks is called "Karnaval". Without realizing it, I was playing on the carnival code: a kind of free space where many genres gather in numbers, superior to the powers that be, to turn the world upside down for the duration of the party. (E-mail to Monteanni, 8 August 2023)

Furthermore, in concert with *Rise of the Gazunderlings* rationale, when asked to comment on HDK's reading of the goblin as a working-class icon, DJ David Goblin reinforced this perception by underlining how goblins are inherently linked to power overthrow:

It's a common representation of the Goblins, for example I created the expression 'Govern Or Be Zero' for the acronym of my brand: GOBZ™, which symbolizes the fact that every Gobz is plotting a strategy deep in his cave to overthrow power. (E-mail interview with Monteanni, 21 August 2023)

Considering the examples I brought, by analyzing how the global underground has incorporated fantasy and RPG elements we can see

⁷ <https://heimatderkatastrophe.bandcamp.com/album/hdk-86-the-rise-of-the-gazunderlings>.

that alongside the need of escapism from a grim reality, artists have developed a unique audiovisual and paratextual language allowing to articulate one's position in late capitalism and respond to pressures in contexts of existential and social hardship. Circling back to our musicians stuck in dead-end jobs and economic instability, in HDK's worldbuilding this attitude culminates with the disenfranchised figure of the goblin: a lowly worker and possible lumpenproletariat of the dungeon populace. To clarify further the subterranean importance of the goblin for late capitalism's global imagination and how its development led to 'goblin mode', in the next section I'll reconstruct what role and meaning goblins occupy in contemporary culture and how their description has shifted significantly since their first appearance in folk tales and regional traditions. Such reconstruction will show how the imaginary of the goblin, dense with references to mischievousness, laziness, self-neglect, living in cramped, dark and subterranean places, was extraordinarily respondent to underground musicians' need to express and depict metaphorically their living conditions and practices both online and offline.

4 **Messy, Feral, Mischievous: The Goblin from Folk Literature to Popular Culture**

Media theory has profusely analyzed the figure of the troll, which from a snarling creature of Norse mythology (Phillips 2015, 15) became the icon of provocateur users on the Internet employing harassment to build character, explore problematic practices without consequences and toy with boundaries of online etiquette (de Seta 2018). Yet, goblins remained ignored until 'goblin mode' exploded on the Internet. What is it of this dungeon creature that generated identification and symbolic, creative manipulation?

According to traditional European folklore, a goblin is a little, hideous, monstrous creature [fig. 8]. The term is colloquially employed to refer to all little, fay monsters, including imps, leprechauns, kobolds and all sorts of evil or mischievous spirits (Shaijan 2019, 7). *The Dictionary of Fairies* (Briggs 1976, 32-3) defines goblin as "evil and malicious spirits, usually small and grotesque in appearance," and a subterranean species afraid of sunlight (Schwedel 2022). First recorded in the fourteenth century and most likely derived from the unattested Anglo-Norman *gobelin* (CNRTL, s.d.) and Medieval Latin *gobelinus* (Du Cange 1678), it has been recently expanded to refer to similar beings from different cultures, such as the *pukwudgie*, *dokkaebi* (도깨비), or *ifrit* (Shaijan 2019, 8). Goblins' magical skills, temperaments, and appearances vary according to the country of origin, ranging from mischievous household spirits to vicious, bestial robbers (Gillian 1974).



Figures 8a-b Two depictions of the goblin. On the left, a drawing from nineteenth century's *English Fairy Tales*. On the right, an illustration from the *D&D's Monster Manual*

When it comes to the specific world of RPGs, the *D&D Monster Manual* defines goblins as:

small, black-hearted, selfish humanoids that lair in caves, abandoned mines, despoiled dungeons, and other dismal settings. Individually weak, goblins gather in large – sometimes overwhelming – numbers. They crave power and regularly abuse whatever authority they obtain. (Wizards R.P.G., Wizards of the Coast Inc. 2014, 165)

TV Tropes, a renown website documenting popular plot conventions and devices, adds a number of interesting specifics to this definition:

their lack of size and strength makes any evil act they may commit seem comical by default, and thus they tend to serve as the lowest rung of the Sorting Algorithm of Evil,⁸ and are usually the first kind of Mook a budding adventurer will fight.

⁸ A narrative, taxonomical device according to which “Villains will appear in strictly ascending order by menace”. Tv Tropes, “Sorting Algorithm of Evil”. <https://tv-tropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/SortingAlgorithmOfEvil>.

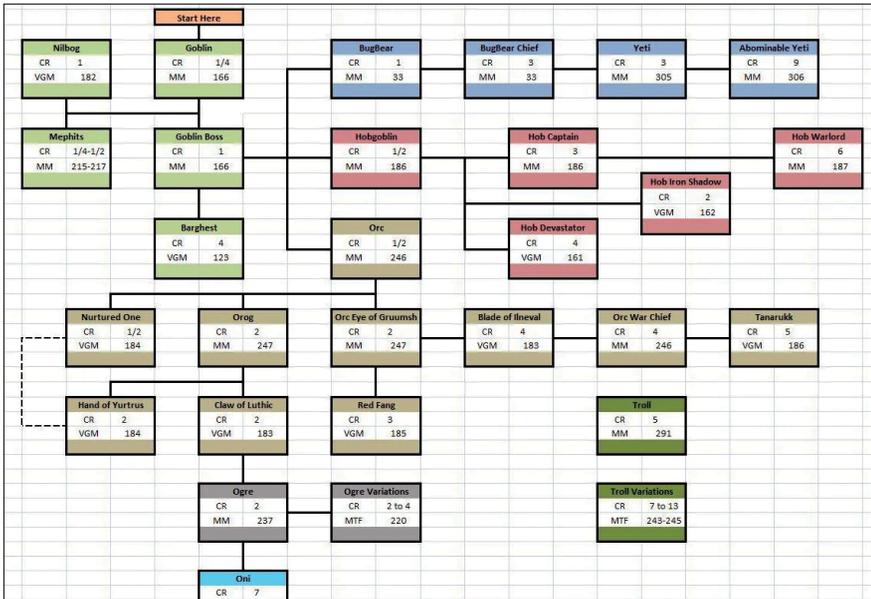


Figure 9 A taxonomy of goblins for D&D scenarios created by user 'TheUnregisteredNurse' on the r/DungeonMasters subreddit

Individually, goblins are overall mischievous, lazy and undisciplined, selfish and comically weak. According to the context in which they are imagined, they may or may not be related to other similar, goblinoid creatures such as hobgoblins, ogres, gremlins and orcs (Shaijan 2019), becoming a folk entity based on locale specifics (Manning 2014).

In spite of this, goblins' contemporary conception was majorly influenced by modern fantasy literature rather than folklore. Generally, *The Lord of the Rings* writer J.R.R. Tolkien is credited for introducing taxonomies of fantastic races, as well as introducing moral divisions between them: a logic for which in Tolkien's world goblins are evil and elves are good (Schwedel 2022). Interestingly, decades later these classifications have often been interpreted as racist transpositions of ethnic stereotypes stemming from a xenophobic, eurocentric perspective in which goblins were defined by the dominating race, i.e. humans (Ferguson 2023), thus bringing politicized afcionados, as part of an anti-anthropocentric rethinking of the fantasy genre and ecosystems, to reconsider them as equal races among the others rather than monsters. This is clear in the second edition of *D&D*, where these creatures become ethnic groupings rather than



Figures 10a-c Left to right, *Harry Potter's* head goblin, *Spiderman's* Green Goblin and *Mandalorian's* Baby Yoda

abnormal things that challenge reality's order simply by existing.⁹

At the same time, the goblin has reached other fields of the human imagery becoming widespread in popular audiovisual productions: goblins are employees of Gringotts, the bank of the wizards' world in the *Harry Potter* franchise, and Green Goblin is one of Spiderman's main antagonists [figs 10a-c]. Even characters that are apparently distant from the goblins resemble their appearances. This is the case with *Star Wars'* franchise character Yoda. While iconic horror-comedy *Gremlins'* director Joe Dante made claims that *Mandalorian's*¹⁰ version of the character is an unoriginal dupe of *Gremlins'* Gizmo, hinting at a Disneyfication of goblins, Internet users have complementarily argued that Yoda is actually a goblin through ironic petitions¹¹ and YouTube videos¹² [fig. 11].

But goblins are not only pop culture icons, if only peripheral ones. The online world has added to their mythology in various ways. On slang definitions website *Urban Dictionary*, users have identified in goblin traits the behavior of chronically online users that have 'lost all of their humanity' and help trolls in their nasty endeavors¹³ or as a populace who occupies certain spaces of the Twitter social media.¹⁴ In other realms of the Internet, the goblin becomes a useful token

⁹ "What Fantasy Monster Would Have the Most 'evolution' (ex. Goblin -> Hobgoblin -> Ogre -> Minotaur)?" *Quora*. <https://www.quora.com/What-fantasy-monster-would-have-the-most-evolution-ex-Goblin-Hobgoblin-Ogre-Minotaur>.

¹⁰ *The Mandalorian* is the first *Star Wars* franchise's live-action series.

¹¹ "ACKNOWLEDGE THAT YODA IS A GOBLIN". *Change.org*. <https://www.change.org/p/disney-lucasfilm-acknowledge-that-yoda-is-a-goblin>.

¹² "Baby Yoda = Goblin! Mandalorian & Goblin Slayer in Space". *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i2N7pGsZYpg>.

¹³ "Goblin". *Urban Dictionary*. <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=goblin&page=3>.

¹⁴ "Goblin mode". *Urban Dictionary*. <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Goblin+mode>.



Figures 11a-b 'ACKNOWLEDGE THAT YODA IS A GOBLIN' petition and the *Baby Yoda = Goblin! Mandalorian & Goblin Slayer in Space*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i2N7pGsZYgp>.

in memes and other vernacular digital productions for users to joke, provoke, protest and cause havoc [fig. 12]. For instance, one can find on the Telegram messaging app packs of edgy and controversial goblin stickers that couple racial slurs, blackpill ideology¹⁵ and general profanity [fig. 13]. Furthermore, in June 2023, a popular *D&D* subreddit experienced an “influx of sexualised goblin content” (Brown 2023) as a protest over Reddit’s controversial decision to start charging developers for access to its previously free API.¹⁶ While protests began with days of subreddit censorship, Reddit administrators quickly warned users that moderators who kept their communities locked would be removed. In response, users in the 1.1 million followers *r/dndmemes* subreddit started posting memes about low-level *D&D* opponents, gradually shifting to unstoppable uploads of graphic images of goblin porn.

As these examples show, the image of goblins may be used online as a tool to execute certain actions and embody certain traits. I argue that this is because, such as for the troll, the goblins’ Internet imagery has formed by abstracting some of the qualities that are most adaptable to the ones of the medium, namely the ones of mischievousness, disavowal of rules and creating havoc in otherwise stable systems and environments. Interestingly, such traits’ abstraction also happens with other types of non-Internet phenomena. Given their supposed negative and evil nature, goblins and their ‘cousins’ are employed in medicine and marketing research studies. In these sectors ‘gremlins’ are respectively: a glycoprotein antagonist of bone

¹⁵ A nihilist ideology for which society is “dominated by feminism, but given that physical attractiveness is genetically predetermined, incels are destined to either accept their fate or change society, usually through mass violence or terrorism” (Perlinger, Stevens, Leidig 2023, 6).

¹⁶ API is the acronym for ‘application programming interface’: a software intermediary that allows two applications to talk to each other. APIs are an accessible way to extract and share data within and across organizations.



Figure 12
A goblin-themed meme

morphogenetic protein actions (Koketsu et al. 2015) and information-poor respondents increasing the noise (i.e. unexplained variability within a data sample) in data statistics (Howell, Ebbes, Liechty 2021).

Until this point, on the one hand, I have shown how the lack of spaces where to practice music and create a scene due to urban gentrification has forced musicians to thrive through an internet showing a structure akin to the topology of a megadungeon. On the other, I have explained how the imagery related to medieval and goblin tropes was useful to underground musicians to express a sense of alienation and existential dread alongside with the need to counteract the causes of these feelings through imagination and creativity. Furthermore, analysing the relationships between trolling and internet practices highlights why the figure of the goblin is especially relevant to internet subcultures. To continue, I want to focus on what we can understand about emerging attitudes towards modernity through the juxtaposition of goblins and noise. Goblins as noise, as interferences of societal expectations perfectly fit the usages and ideologies born around this figure. Interpreting my analysis and the historical emergence of 'goblin mode' through this green noise, a noise framed by Attali's theories on the political economy of music, discloses paramount deductions regarding how the modes of living of underground artists is to be taken into account as a test field of ever-evolving human social conditions under capitalism. Hence, in the upcoming analysis, after highlighting the reasons and circumstances under which the 'goblin mode' trend appeared, I will circle back to our initial premises analyzing why interpreting goblins from the perspective of underground musicians can tell us much about social configurations to come.



Figure 13 Controversial pack of Telegram stickers in Italian depicting goblins

5 Low Level, Low Class: ‘Goblin Mode’ and Predicting the Future from the Megadungeon’s Peripheries

‘Goblin mode’ is a neologism implying the hedonistic rejection of conventional aesthetic standards without regard for one’s self-image (Schwedel 2022). While the word has been used since 2009 with various definitions, it is thought to have become popular in 2015 when comedian Sam Jelbert observed his friend Toby ‘going Goblin Mode’ (Pearce 2023). ‘Goblin mode’ has also been related to a viral Reddit post in which a user admits to acting ‘like a goblin’ at home when alone [fig. 14]. The term gained popularity after Twitter user @housesitter_ posted in 2021 “thinkin about how someone I used to hook up with called cowgirl position ‘goblin mode’” (Adam 2022) and becoming mainstream in 2022 after a tweet by user @JUNIPER featured a doctored news story from an interview with actress Julia Fox, claiming she used the words describing her difficult relationship with Kanye West [fig. 15] (Rushforth 2022).

The term soon became ubiquitous on social media platforms like TikTok (Gilchrist 2022). This was not the first time a ‘-mode’ was coined: people started going ‘beast mode’ in 2007, using ‘savage’ and ‘sicko’ thereafter. These trends started from the gaming world, where a hidden challenge may activate a special style of gameplay (Tusa 2022). In this sense, one acquires the most apparent traits of X when you go X mode, going ‘goblin mode’, then, meant activating one’s messy, feral, mischievous self.

I like to creep around my home and act like a goblin

Sasuke-in-SSBU · 21 hours ago · confessions · 🌟 3 · 98% upvoted

I don't know why but I just enjoy doing this. Maybe it's my way of dealing with stress or something but I just do it about once every week. Generally I'll carry around a sack and creep around in a sort of crouch-walking position making goblin noises, then I'll walk around my house and pick up various different "trinkets" and put them in my bag while saying stuff like "I'll be having that" and laughing maniacally in my goblin voice ("trinkets" can include anything from shit I find on the ground to cutlery or other utensils). The other day I was talking with my neighbours and they mentioned hearing weird noises like what I wrote about and I was just internally screaming the entire conversation. I'm 99% sure they don't know it's me but god that 1% chance is seriously weighing on my mind.

Figure 14 The Reddit user admits to acting 'like a goblin' at home

In December 2022, for the first time in history, Oxford allowed online users to choose their word of the year from a shortlist that included 'metaverse' and '#IStandWith'. 'Goblin mode' won. The trend's popularity has been deemed to be a result of the widespread fixation with household and personal betterment that the early pandemic had generated, and that was rejected after dealing with the prolonged state of anxiety and uncertainty (Paul 2022). The style seems in fact to be a direct break from another aesthetic: the early pandemic's hyper-curated 'cottagecore' influence, a notable 2020 trend including bucolic landscapes and the presentation of wholesome homemaking skills such as baking and embroidery. Cottagecore thrived on the nostalgic concept of making the most of what many people expected to be a few weeks at home (Paul 2022). However, as the pandemic continued and the turmoil of present events deepened with the threat of World War Three, people started rejecting such aims. 'Goblin mode' thus captured the mood of individuals who rebelled against the increasingly unattainable aesthetic standards and unsustainable lifestyles displayed on social media (Knight 2022). According to American linguist Ben Zimmer, "'goblin mode' truly speaks to the times [...] it allows people to abandon societal norms in favor of new ones".¹⁷

Practically, the 'goblin mode' umbrella described a frame of mind embracing the comforts of depravity and encompassing a wide range of aesthetics and actions expressing existential dread. Most voted *Urban Dictionary* definition recites: "When you lose yourself so you resort to becoming a goblin" (dr. shitheadashole 2022).

¹⁷ <https://ludwig.guru/blog/goblin-mode-origins-and-usage-of-the-word-of-the-year-2022/>.

Julia Fox opened up about her 'difficult'
relationship with Kanye West "He didn't like when I
went goblin mode"

by Pinkvilla Desk | Published on Feb 16, 2022 06:36 AM IST | 1.4K



Figure 15
The fake headline
that popularized
'goblin mode'

Another interesting definition from *Urban Dictionary* strengthening the relations between goblins and the Internet states that 'goblin mode' means "participating in evil and vile activities such as being chronically online" (Trech00 2022).¹⁸

These attitudes have been generally defined as antisocial: something that violates society's norms (Schwedel 2022), and although gothic researchers and experts judge the term somewhat of a misnomer, asserting that it does not embody the actual qualities of goblins (George 2022), other scholars supported the expression's current usage. Folklorist Merrill Kaplan argued that the term's precise usefulness is to be a tool for younger generations to express previously undefinable feelings (Schwedel 2022). As Shane Tilton, associate professor of writing and multimedia studies at Ohio Northern University and author of *Meme Life*, remarked in an interview with NBC News: "Once you have a word for something, it can be shared. It becomes reality. It was abstract, and you made it real" (quoted in Rosenblatt 2022).

Although the social craze is now declining in popularity (Rushforth 2022), it pointed out very real problems and suggested solutions. The term was discussed by medical experts (Mercado 2022), and it supported people who did not fit into the rigid framework of societal expectations in being themselves (Miller 2022) by offering a mythological space (Paul 2022), which is what my underground music circle of artists was already doing years before the pandemic struck and the trend emerged.

We can note the similarities between the employment of this fantasy semantics in the mainstream and in the underground. First of all,

¹⁸ "Goblin Mode". *Urban Dictionary*. <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Goblin+mode>.

both come from feelings of discomfort and impotence towards new social configurations that heavily restrain mobility and jeopardize certainty towards the future. Secondly, in both social groupings the active employment of these symbols indicates the need to conceptualize individuals' unprecedented existential experiences and react to them taking back control over a situation of reduced agency. From this point of view, delving deeper into the relationship between music and social structures can shed light on why underground musicians experienced this phenomenon first and what it entails for my argument.

In his book *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (1985), Jacques Attali sees music as the most potent source for comprehending the forces of production shaping the world around us. The author attempts to trace the evolution of musical ideas as they connect with material situations. In his analysis, he divides music history into four periods: Sacrificing, Representing, Repeating, and Composing; each of these foreshadowing a forthcoming revolution in the political economy. While marxist thought has asserted that political and economic forces can influence the form and substance of cultural acts like music (Marx 1887, 346), Attali reverses this relationship, asserting that music created under certain conditions articulates how things will change in the future. Specifically, Attali considered sound recording an epitome of late-stage capitalism's extraordinary productive capacities and like Adorno before him (2022), he regarded industrialization's mass production as leading to a banalization of music meeting market needs. Unlike Adorno, though, Attali maintained that these tools may be used for liberation. This leads to the text's speculative part: the period of composition. In this period, recording technologies' musical practices heralded an era of democratization, foreshadowing a broader redistribution of productive power.

Of course, his ideas met critics, not least for his eurocentric vision that does not take into account anything outside of the Western music tradition (Shaviro 2005) and the fact that, as I have shown elsewhere (Monteanni, Pennesi 2022), democratic music technologies and decentralization do not necessarily lead to a more equal society. And yet, the power of Attali's theories lies in the politicization of sound. As Steven Shaviro has noted in his text's analysis (2005), music is the structuring of sound: by channeling certain sounds in specific orders, it distinguishes between legitimate and illegitimate sounds; the latter are consigned to the category of 'noise', although the presence of 'noise' as dissent at society's periphery can never be totally erased. Through noise, a struggle exists between 'official' music, symbolizing the existing order, and a subversive counter-music, expressing the rage of those who are excluded from power, struggling to define a new form of society. The relationships between noise and power strengthen when we think that the definition of sound and noise was only possible thanks to the technological possibility of measuring, analyzing and

‘prophetic’ capability comes from corporations researching artists to understand their ability to live in hostile economic conditions so as to apply these logics to consumers. Conversely, cultural theorist Mark Fisher (2009) has remarked how artists often cause processes of gentrification, making unattractive areas interesting through music. What is fundamental here, is that the power of Attali’s theories is for the first time proved by the relevance of a basic, low level and low-class fantastic creature under-theorized by music research.

6 Conclusions: Life out of the Megadungeon

As I have shown, goblins are far from being exclusively escapist fantasies. Since their first descriptions they have invaded global imagination as a symbol for mischievous activity and rebellion to society’s conventions for the good and the bad. Particularly, in this article I wanted to illustrate how an archaeology of the goblin signifier informs us about larger processes taking place in society such as the need for emancipatory escapist narratives to react to increasingly difficult living conditions in our urbanized, capitalist world or the necessity of ‘inhabiting’ ever-expanding digital infrastructures to compensate progressive, compulsory social isolation and unsuitable living conditions.

Particularly, in the first section I have used my own experience as a participant of the digital underground music scene alongside qualitative, ethnographic interviews with actors closely connected to my circle to address why they found the goblin metaphor suitable to describe their living conditions and their usage of the internet for musical purposes. When paired with theories about megadungeon topologies as a model for the Internet’s architecture, these interviews have revealed that musicians perceive underground scenes as virtual locations and employ the Internet’s intricate structure as a place where to discover content, facilitate music circulation and build social circles. Additionally, I have taken into consideration theories and definition of underground music to suggest that this metagenre, a way to go about things more than a combination of definite musical styles, is especially alive on the Internet.

In the second section I showed that the fantasy and medieval imagery became relevant to these actors in order to explore and articulate both sentiments of exclusion from contemporary society as well as the necessity to exploit a renewed imaginative potential, weaponizing them through artistic and leisure creativity against their conditions of marginalization. Moreover, in the last part of this section I have also brought a case study from label HDK to underline how these imageries are, at times, deeply political and linked to class narratives generated by the experience of living under late capitalism.

In the third section I reviewed the history of the goblin as a figure of the collective imagination, explaining how from its origins in folklore to Tolkien, mainstream pop culture and, last, the Internet it has been loaded with symbols of human negativity and rouguishness. This section provided information on the reasons that made the goblin perfect as a figure symbolizing the elusion and inversion of societal expectations, something that underground musicians already embraced, and an emblem of metaphorical and literal noise.

In the last section I reviewed the birth and spread of 'goblin mode' and read its occurrence through Attali's research on noise and music to prove that social movements of musicians have, coherently with the scholar's theories, anticipated current modes of living and upcoming social configurations consisting in constrained mobilities, shunning of social norms and hypertrophic consumption of digital content.

Regarding this last point, if at the beginning of my analysis I was afraid of pigeonholing a number of real issues in made-up categories, taking seriously musicians' interest for the character of the goblin has meant instead discovering how an imagery that is usually restricted to geeky hobbyists has become a discursive field reflecting individuals' identities and responsibilities to confront issues of class, gender and modernity and reacting to contemporary social conditions. At the periphery of our hearing field, noisy hordes are chanting of times to come, and trying to understand their sounds - just like corporations are already doing - helps us comprehend what society at large may experience in the very next future, allowing more awareness and strategy in our incrementally necessary political action and daily survival.

And yet, to use the megadungeon vocabulary, how many treasure chests and dark chambers have yet to be opened? Certainly, my sources and imaginaries make the argument somewhat eurocentric. How would my analyses change if, for instance, we'd take a look at the figure of the Korean *dokkaebi*? Or realize that Asia is the continent that according to Google Trends was at any time the most interested in goblins?¹⁹ Similarly, my debate is unsurprisingly goblin-centric. What would we discover by researching more about the differences and affinities between, say, goblins and gremlins? What could a map of these fantastical creatures reveal to us if put in relation to how individuals inside and outside the Internet realms imagine them? For the time being, I have offered a way to revalue a creature-concept that, differently from his 'cousin', the troll, has been completely ignored by academic literature. Then, instead of letting go of what is generally believed to be a basic, low level creature incapable of

¹⁹ Google Trends. "Goblin". <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&q=goblin&hl=it>.

articulation, assuming that the loot will be of scarce importance, chasing the goblin's vicious noises through today's information and musical labyrinths means trying to imagine what neglected visions and instruments lie beyond the next dungeon door and what we may discover if we crawl in these depths for long enough.

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Year of the Goblin Mixtape

Listen at: <https://www.mixcloud.com/Shortwavessurfers/year-of-the-goblin-megadungeon-mixtape/>

Mortiis – The Song Of A Long Forgotten Ghost (1993)
WOZZA – Wacko's (2022)
DJ Armok – Misery ft. MC Holocaust (2019)
Grol the Goblin – The Goblin Shroom of Doom (2018)
Goblin King of the Popstars – Plyint (2018)
DJ Kimchi – Goblin Mode (2022)
talpah – THE BEGINNING AND THE END ARE ONE AND THE SAME (2021)
Goblinectomy Beatdown – Goblincore (2022)
Grausamkeit (B.S.o.D) – PCP Jesus (1999)
DJ David Goblin – Squigpipe (2018)
RED GREMLIN – Rise of the Gazunderlings (2021)
Piyakdu – Goblin, or The Coveteousnesse of Eye (2023)
TMT – La Stanza (2022)
Dunkelbot – Zteč (2020)
Kuthi Jin – Crawl (2020)
Xperiametaphone – Ü ÄÅ (2019)
Señor Service – Levanidovo (2021)
Babau x TMT – Paranoia Agent (2022)
Dilian – Falls off the edge like (Ninja Exotic Machine) (2023)
Ceramics – Goblin Gathering Side A (excerpt)
Rhyme Artist – Previously on Goblin Tales (2023)
loogi – ¡goblin mode! (2023)
LUSTWARE – GOBLIN MODE (2022)
Nekrogoblikon – No One Survives (2012)
Goblin Noises (Sacred) (2004)

