

# STRANGE MACHINES

*max wickstrom*™ ® © 2021



Discovering and listening to music has always been my biggest passion in life and my primary way of coping with my emotions. I think its main appeal to me is the comfort it brings in knowing that at some point in time, another human felt the same thing as me and was able to survive and express it by making something beautiful. I started writing my own music when I was about 14 and it's been my most fun and fulfilling creative outlet. A lot of trained musicians gatekeep, intimidate, and discourage amateurs. People mystify and mythologize the creative process as if it's the product of some elusive, innate genius rather than experimentation and a simple love of music.

When I'm working on a big project, my ego sometimes makes it feel like this grand, important piece of work. After I finished recording this album in November, I took a break from listening to it so I could revisit it later with a new perspective. When I did, my view of the project unraveled. What I heard took me back to when I first started making music nearly a decade ago. I actually ended up laughing through most of it. While I've obviously improved, or at least found ways to hide my shortcomings, I haven't changed as much as I thought I had since I started recording as a teenager. It was so funny to hear the album for what it is: a kid with a lifelong obsession with pop music naively thinking he could emulate the sound of his favorite albums with no formal training using Audacity. I disregarded (or honestly didn't even really consider) the fact that my inspirations were the work of an entire team of professional musicians and producers. After I was able to get

past the initial embarrassment of hearing it, I found something very endearing about the sincere ambition of the project and its meticulous care and perfectionism. I think the attempt and failure to imitate familiar music has created its own genre that could only exist with the accessibility of modern technology. The ability to hear pretty much all of 20th century music history at your immediate whim while sitting alone in your room offers a completely different context than what its creators intended. It yields a much different creative response.

*Strange Machines* is comprised of nine songs, six with lyrics and three modular synth instrumentals. Two were written specifically for the project. The other four I wrote years ago but hadn't yet finished recordings of that I was happy with. Because I didn't anticipate the songs would end up together, I struggled for a while deciding how I'd make a cohesive video to unite them. I noticed that there were some clear threads running through. Instead of trying to come up with a linear plot, I decided to create three characters that I could use to represent the themes I identified in the lyrics.



The title track is about a lonely girl, who I've named "Lucky", using the internet as a form of escapism. This was the last song I finished writing and it inspired the concept and appearance of the whole film. "The Arsonist" is the album's unreliable narrator. He tries to disguise his unease with grandiosity, attempting to turn the confusing experience of living into neatly-packaged (and most likely imaginary) stories. I think of the narration as a distancing from or perhaps disowning of a helpless past self, describing and acting out an emotional experience without actually feeling anything. The third character, "The Creature", moves as if it's possessed, contorting unnaturally and tensing in physical pain. All of

the characters make me think of uncanny video game avatars. In the final track's end sequence, there are flashes of the characters crouched in unnatural positions laid over the video. This was inspired by the way the games in *The Sims* series glitch up and your Sims start twisting grotesquely when you download user-made custom content from sketchy blogs. With my characters, I portray aspects of myself that make me uncomfortable and leave the viewer to trust my intentions and level of self-awareness. The performances are deliberately weird and awkward, but not intentionally bad. Rather, I allowed them to fall short when I was unable to achieve the effect I wanted. This was my approach towards the whole project and my art in general.



As my music exists entirely as digital recordings, there's no inherent reason for me to be an amazing guitar player who can play a song perfectly all the way through - mistakes can be easily cut out and re-recorded. My songs aren't really suited for live performance. I try to create a convincing simulation by piecing together sounds, panning them, and adding reverb and other effects to give the listener the illusion of a setting. If I lack the skill to play a part, my style is very forgiving. I can switch instruments or insert a heavily edited sample and the band-aid sounds like a deliberate creative choice. As someone who enjoys having complete creative control over my projects, there's no way I could master all the required roles. I consider myself a decent songwriter, but as far as everything else goes, I teach myself the bare minimum to achieve the sound I want.

I still discover a lot of the music I listen to through old Blogspot pages - a surprising number of Mediafire links are still live, and even more surprisingly, many of these blogs are still being updated. Most are unlisted in search engines and can only be found through links from other blogs. This is one of the few remaining

areas of the web that retains the anarchic DIY ethics of its early days. I find it very comforting that there are still file sharing communities on the internet despite the move toward slick, corporate social media and sponsored advertising. This community dynamic and the free sharing of information and media between users has informed my own work and how I choose to distribute it. It's very important to me that everything I make is available for free digitally on social media and my website. Once my art is digitally documented, I feel little interest in or attachment to the physical object and will usually give it away.



I felt very different using the internet in my childhood than I do now. With Google's current algorithm you really have to dig to find anything but corporate websites. Search results used to be very unpredictable. You'd usually be sent to weird blog posts and obscure forums on the first page. Though I was born in 1998 and my internet use began around 2005, a lot of the pages I explored were from much earlier. I read teenager's LiveJournal posts and Myspace pages and was so excited to be old enough to have my own accounts, not realizing the sites would be a complete joke by the time I was in high school. I felt so much wonder and excitement about what I would discover every time I went online. Somehow I avoided seeing anything too emotionally scarring, although I did infect my family's desktop with malware at least weekly. I mostly just played browser games and read Wikipedia articles. Many of my lyrics are fragmented amalgamations of real people and events that I've read about but have never experienced. A lot of kids, including me, grew up reading about fringe topics on the internet - cults, classified government experiments, unsolved mysteries, psychic phenomena, alien abduction stories, every strange event in history. Like many of us, I thought that my love of media from previous decades meant I was born in "the wrong generation," but I

realize now that the 21st century suits me perfectly. There's no way I realistically could have had time to read about all of my interests at the library or afford to buy thousands of albums in physical form (and real-life theft seems to be much more frowned upon than internet piracy).



One of my biggest inspirations and one of the reasons I began making art in the first place was the virtual pet site [Neopets](#). This was where I first learned to code and got feedback on my drawings. I think the bright colors, cute-but-weird artwork, and early-internet aesthetic had a big effect on my own artistic style. As one might imagine, my design choices at the time were not the most subtle or tasteful, but I remember being so proud of the heinous layouts I created and pulling them up in the school computer lab to show my friends and teachers. For years, I was mortified by the neon webpages and the smudgy pencil drawings I made in elementary and middle school. I wouldn't have imagined letting anyone see them. I thought that to be a real artist, I had to have always had talent and good taste - no one could know that in 2008, I was drawing the same monstrously proportioned anime cat girls as every other dorky ten-year-old.

I'd describe the visual style of [Strange Machines](#) as digital-kitsch. My cluttered, maximalist style lends itself well to online viewing, as the viewer can pause it and skip around at their own pace if they'd like to see the details.



One video is modeled after Youtube lyric videos people made in the 2000s. It seemed as if the creators didn't even bother to watch them after they were finished editing - you'd rarely find one without typos and misheard lyrics. The videos always ended with a disclaimer that they didn't intend copyright infringement as if this would grant some kind of immunity. I also wrote my own

chainmail in the spirit of the ones kids used to email between friends and classmates. Before the internet, physical chainmail letters were generally pyramid schemes intended to scam vulnerable people and take their money. In the 2000s, they became something more innocent and playful, claiming to grant the reader good luck if they passed the email along or curse them if they deleted it. Kids shared these the same way they shared horror stories at a slumber party.

I see the project as a time capsule of both the decade that inspired it and the decade I made it in. It's as much about 2000s digital aesthetics as it is my generation's obsession with that era in the 2010s and '20s. It clearly wasn't actually created in the early days of the internet - I'm guessing in a few years it'll be pretty obvious to people that it was made by a Gen Z member in 2021. We cringe at the things young people post online, but I think there's something beautiful about creating media you know will become very dated. There's such a pressure to be "original" and "ahead of your time" when really, I don't think there's anything wrong with taking inspiration from the pop culture you love. In the same way I feel about the art I made in the 2000s, I like the idea of looking back at what I was doing in 2021 and feeling a little embarrassed by my creative decisions.

Some of my lyrical themes are more serious, but I want the project to have an offbeat humor. I think there's a specific place of vulnerability I aimed for. When you claim a piece of art is ironic and purposely bad, it automatically puts up a wall of defense between you and your audience that makes the work untouchable and removed from critique. It's tempting to spare yourself from the humiliation you risk every time you express yourself through art, but I tried to honor the things I liked and the emotions I had as a kid without satire or judgement. I think using stock photos, garish fonts, and giving uncomfortably awkward performances could easily veer the project into a jaded irony, but I intend it to be very sincere,

even if that could subject me to some embarrassment. Instead of a disparaging parody, it's an empathetic celebration of my childhood fantasies of emulating the musicians I idolized and the curiosity and fun I had using the early internet. Hope you enjoy! :)

