

## Fanvids

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This chapter is about Star Trek fanvids, which are a form of fanwork that originated with a 1975 slide-tape performed at a fan convention by Kandy Fong. The soundtrack was reportedly the filksong ‘What Do You Do With a Drunken Vulcan?’ (Coppa 2008; 2016); the slides were made using film stills taken from TOS outtakes, placed in a sequence that would resonate with key points of the song, and manually advanced as the music played. Coming before the release of TMP, these performances offered new content for convention audiences, as well as a playful take on a beloved set of characters (Coppa 2016). While the practice quickly migrated to videotape (producing what were sometimes called ‘songtapes’) and was picked up by other fandoms, Star Trek vidding still has a presence today amongst digital vidding and online distribution.

Today, fanvids (often ‘vids’) are short works that resemble music videos, with clips from a TV series or film quickly cut and restructured, typically limited to the length of the song used for its soundtrack—the song’s title will normally become the fanvid’s title as well.<sup>1</sup> As with other kinds of media fandom, vidding is dominated by female and non-binary fans (Coppa 2006; Lothian 2009; Coppa 2008; Stein 2014). With meaning made through editing and song choice, vidding is about sharing collective interpretations of characters, relationships, and the franchise as a whole (Turk 2010; Svegaard 2019; Stevens 2020). This chapter discusses three aspects of Star Trek vidding: TOS slash vids, character studies from

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<sup>1</sup> Should a reader wish to view these fanvids, I have provided identifying information to guide a search. Fanworks are often posted in ‘intimate yet public’ fannish spaces (Stein 2015, 178), and emerging best practice in fandom studies respects these boundaries and does not supply a direct URL.

ST09 and DSC that explore an unarticulated interiority, and finally fanvids which look across the films and series of the franchise to account for its pleasures as a transmedia text.

Ultimately, fanvids offer us a view into the ways Star Trek has been watched and understood by its fans.

### **What (and why) are fanvids?**

Each fanvid is made to provoke an emotional response (laughter, sorrow, desire), demonstrating an “affective invocation of our collective engagement with media culture” (Stein 2014, para. 25), even as that work responds to (and adds to) fannish discourse around its subject matter. For example, Llin’s fanvid *Harbor* (2018), discussed below, offers a view of Star Trek that foregrounds women’s friendship, all the while presenting an implicit critique of the relative scarcity of female characters across the franchise. Vidding relies on its audiences’ ability to decode the associations created between shots and song lyrics, and to read “the critical analysis of pleasure in a fan text and the simultaneous reinscription of that pleasure” common in fanvids (Winters 2012, para. 1.1). Indeed, it is acknowledged within fandom and in scholarship that it can take some time to learn how to watch vids.

Fanvids function through editing choices and careful selection of soundtrack. A fanvid’s song (sometimes referred to as a vidsong) constructs an affective frame for the interplay of image and lyrics that is typically given as the core functioning of fanvids (Svegaard 2019). A majority of fanvids focus on characters and relationships, but as the clips used are silenced, the vidsongs give, or perhaps return, a voice to characters (Stevens 2020). As Tisha Turk argues, song choice attends to “the emotions of fictional characters; we make those characters say what we assume or believe they are thinking” (2015, 171). For example, *Dedicated Follower of Fashion* (purplefringe, 2017) playfully presents evidence regarding Garak’s (Andrew Robinson) claim to be “just a simple tailor”. Character study fanvids adapt

the fannish way of speaking with/for characters that Cassandra Amesley noted was performed by fans who watched TOS reruns together, where the interjected comments made to flesh out a character's "projected inner state [...] underlining a particular interpretation of a character perception" (1989, 335). In fanvids, the lyrics and instrumentation, along with the sequencing and selection of clips, take on a similar function of speaking unspoken thoughts on behalf of these characters.

Beyond an immediate response to a current media property, fanvids can preserve (and archive) a representation of how television, films, and other media have been interpreted by an engaged audience. Fanvids cover a range of subjects, and have been used to address individual characters, pairings and other relationships, areas of concern around a given series or film, or to make a broader comment about a set of tropes or genre as a whole. As Francesca Coppa points out (2008), the original slide-tapes and surviving early videotape fanvids show that early Star Trek vidding was very interested in Spock (Leonard Nimoy), exploring his motivation through character studies and his relationship with Kirk (William Shatner) through slash vids such as *Wind Beneath My Wings* (3 sisters, c. 1983-5), discussed further below. These early works gathered together significant moments in Spock's journey and presented them in an intensified sequence of meaningful moments (Stevens 2020), arguably amplifying their emotional content (Burwell 2015).

As records of interpretation, fanvids capture and communicate a vidder's perspective on a character or relationship. However, as Turk recognizes (2010), this is an act of collaborative interpretation; vids respond to and are made for a community's shared understanding of characters and their motivations. Unlike the potential for fanfiction to move a reader beyond Star Trek canon, fanvids do not as a rule invent new scenarios or characters. Instead, they work with the clips that are available to reveal the meanings that a vidder chooses to locate in their edits. This fannish way of watching television locates individual

moments of significance based on their importance to a narrative, their aesthetic appeal, and the potential subtext (or overt meaning) in actors' gestures and body language. The selective close reading at play in fanvids literally uses clips from a fan's own archive of Star Trek films and episodes to construct these interpretations and arguments, leaving a catalogue of significant moments that we can interpret in turn.

### **Where does vidding come from?**

While fanvids emerged from convention culture, they now flourish online. Significantly, fanvids were and are made for an audience of fellow fans, and folded neatly into media fan conventions that provided space to screen episodes, films, interview clips, trailers, bloopers and other material to groups of engaged and interested attendees (Jenkins 1992; Bacon-Smith 1992; Coppa 2006; Stevens forthcoming). Soon enough, there were single programming tracks focused on fanvids which in turn led to conventions devoted to screening, discussing, and making fanvids. Ultimately, even though fanvids are now more regularly watched alone, the sense that they are made as part of a collective conversation about a media property prevails (Turk 2010).

It is important to note that vids could only happen with syndication and home video technology, providing fans the chance to rewatch episodes and to create an archive of material out of which vids could be made (Stevens 2017; 2020). As Constance Penley (1991) points out, this opportunity to perform careful and close readings of episodes helped fans to note and sometimes to construct homoerotic subtext between characters, giving us both slash fiction and also slash vidding. Today digital transfers of some of these oldest vids are archived in collections such as the Morgan Dawn Fanzine and Fanvid Collection at the University of Iowa Libraries. In recent years, *Archive of Our Own* replaced *LiveJournal* as a platform for individual vidders to share the links to download and stream their vids, along

with commentary; it also provides a space for comments and discussion about the vids, characters, and fandom in general.

In practical terms, today's fanvids are edited digitally, using ripped and captured clips from a range of sources with some fair use protection (see also Tushnet 2007). Vidders use a range of free and licensed video editing software, and careful viewing and discussion of each other's fanvids provides a communal training network both for technical and aesthetic aspects of the practice. Fanvid production is organised around key events in the fannish calendar: for example, the Equinox and Festivids exchanges, where vidders make and receive new works based on prompts; and conventions which solicit and premiere fanvids. New individual fanvids released online outside of a convention or event contribute to a broader ongoing conversation in fandom. Star Trek has remained a regular presence throughout these events, partly due to vidders' persistent affection for science fiction, and partly thanks to new material offered by ST09 and its sequels, and the new characters and settings in DSC.

### **Looking at Star Trek through vids**

As with other underground arts practices, particularly those using media which are now obsolete, there are records of fanvids which no longer survive. There have been thousands of fanvids made over the decades, and these are an illustrative sample of the places vidders have taken Star Trek. To borrow from Michel Chion's work on music videos, each individual fanvid "turns the prism" of its source material "to show its facets" (1994, 166). Taken together, and as shown here through a handful of examples, fanvids turn Star Trek in many ways, revealing the range of facets fans have found in the franchise.

*Showing the facets of TOS*

*Both Sides Now* (Kandy Fong, 1980), a videotaped slide-tape performance, is held to be the earliest fanvid which survives (Kustritz 2014; Coppa 2016). In it, Leonard Nimoy's cover of 'Both Sides Now' becomes "an emotional inner voice for *Star Trek*'s most notorious unemotional character" (Coppa 2008, para. 3.7) when paired with frames lifted from TOS. It suggests—or constructs—a Spock who is willing to take time to contemplate clouds, love, and life, and turns TOS away from Kirk to focus on this other facet of the series. It argues for a Spock whose dispassionate and scientific evaluation of his world is balanced by rich reflection.

Unsurprisingly, another facet of TOS that fanvids preserve is a slash reading of Kirk and Spock's relationship. One side-effect of vidders' choosing clips with significant looks between the characters—adding weight and intensity to each so that Kirk appears to gaze longingly at Spock, for example—is that those moments are marked in the quality of the image itself. For example, the clips used to make *Wind Beneath My Wings* (3 sisters, c. 1983-5; the soundtrack is Gary Morris's recording) vary dramatically in quality, with clarity of image and discoloration betraying the many different generations of tape used in its construction. The clips that bear the most damage are those with the gestures and glances that are evidence for the slash pairing; these are used to build meaning for the audience as well as to build the vid itself. We might say audiences 'consume' television, and the wear that remains in videotape-era fanvids reveals how a series was watched, particularly as repeat rewind and replay of significant moments break down the videotape: the video is literally consumed by the fan-viewer's attention to those key glances and gestures (Stevens 2020). The digital transfer fixes in place the significance of the moments preserved by the fanvid, leaving a lasting record of how this group of vidders both watched and understood Kirk's feelings for and about Spock.

Fanvids have also turned TOS to show facets that propose varying perspectives and moods. *Tik Tok* (MissSheenie, 2010) is one of many lighter (sillier) takes on TOS that are almost a parody of its more earnest reputation. Set to Kesha's 2009 single, *Tik Tok* takes broad gestures over subtle glances to highlights the series' flamboyant visual moments of drinking, dancing, and brawling. Its adaption of TOS makes us *look* at the series rather than to *read* (interpret) any of its arguments for compassion and tolerance. Rather than finding depth of meaning and purpose, *Tik Tok* revels in TOS's camp and colourful visual style. In contrast, one of the most well-known TOS fanvids may well be the dark *Closer* (T. Jonesy and Killa, 2003), which suggests an alternate outcome for "Amok Time" (TOS 2.1, 1967), and which went viral in 2006 after being uploaded to YouTube by a third party (Coppa and Tushnet 2011). This fanvid speculates about what would happen if the *Enterprise* did not reach Vulcan in time, and turns the episode's plot into "a disturbing story about rape" wherein Spock violates Kirk (Russo 2009, 126). The menace is heightened by the faux film decay effect used throughout, giving it the air of a shameful yet compelling piece of history that has been buried in an archive. Bolstered by the explicit Nine Inch Nails song used as its soundtrack, its articulation of a Spock who has lost control due to pon farr and yet acts on his passions has been read as a metaphor for the "fannish experience of taking control of the text while simultaneously feeling in thrall to that text" (Winters 2012, 2.4).

### *Character study vidding*

As mentioned earlier, a character study fanvid "offers a focused and sustained reading of a character's motivations and interiority" (Stevens 2020, 203). One example of this is *It's All Coming Back to Me Now* (Kandy Fong, 1997), which uses Celine Dion's song to articulate the emotional work that Spock performs in TVH following his resurrection amnesia. Using clip/lyric matches, the fanvid argues that the only way his memory ("it") can "all come back"

is through touch (“like this”) seen at the end of SFS, but the fanvid suggests that further touch—specifically, from Kirk—is needed to help him come fully back to himself. *All Coming Back* uses clips from TOS and the earlier films to fill in exactly which memories Spock recovers, and articulates Kirk’s importance in his life.

With the release of ST09, vidders had a new Kirk (Chris Pine) to explore with both an origin story for the character and an alternate universe needing reconciliation. Some fanvid responses were lighter takes, such as *I’m On A Boat* (kiki\_miserychic, 2009), but others worked to understand what this new Kirk was experiencing. Similar to *All Coming Back*, *The Test* (here’s luck, 2010) grabs key moments from TOS to illustrate a character’s past via constructed flashbacks. In this way, a vid-watcher’s memory and the character’s memory aligns. Coppa notes the technical achievement of this piece, pointing out that the films and series used to construct the fanvid “are in different aspect ratios; have different colour palates; are framed, lit, and paced differently” (Coppa 2016, 153) and are yet made to fit together in a unified whole. One might even argue that *The Test* more fully accomplishes what ST09 attempted, that is, to integrate an alternate reality with the established TOS universe. Where *All Coming Back* performs a fan’s memory of Star Trek itself through using notable clips to ‘rebuild’ Spock’s own memory, *The Test* argues that this new Kirk has gained access to that same information through the original Spock.

Finally, character study vidding has been used to amplify and center DSC’s canonical queer characters, namely the couple Stamets (Anthony Rapp) and Culber (Wilson Cruz). Secondary characters are a common subject for character studies, being elevated to a starring role in the fanvid’s version of its source material. *Across the Universe* (isagel, 2018) and *Dark Matter* (isagel, 2020) take a closer look at Stamets and Culber, respectively. These two fanvids follow them in DSC’s first and second seasons, with *Across the Universe* recounting Stamets’s fascinated exploration of the mycelial network and *Dark Matter* following Culber’s



difficult recovery from his time inside the mycelium. In both cases the fanvid form constructs a space that is a rarity for Star Trek: rather than queering characters through a play with subtext, DSC vidding offers a potential to explicitly center an LGBTQ+ experience of the future, one that is wondering, messy and relatable.

### *Reflecting on the franchise*

Finally, fanvids can recount a fannish perspective on Star Trek as a whole, and its transmedia storytelling. *Long Live* (Llin, 2014) uses Taylor Swift's song to construct a space where Star Trek is about finding support and friendship between colleagues as you journey through the farthest reaches of the universe. Its initial montage focuses on Yeoman Rand (Grace Lee Whitney), seemingly aligning the song's lyrics ("I remember this moment") with her until a tracking shot ends with Rand bringing food to Sulu (George Takei). The vid then cuts to a shot of Sulu and Chekov (Walter Koenig) together, then to Chekov with Uhura (Nichelle Nichols), with each cut introducing a new two-shot containing one character from the previous clip with a new companion, moving us from TOS to TNG and then from DS9 to VOY with each connection point transforming the franchise's transmedia strategies into moments of affective resonance. The sequence uses clips of conversation, hugs, and other convivial gestures before the cycle ends—three minutes later—with Rand's appearance in VOY. The final section of the vid focuses on moments of togetherness and celebration across the original cast films, ENT, and ST09 and its sequels that reinforce the relay-style continuities established in the vid's first half. The song's ending—"One day, we will be remembered"—understates the wealth of possible moments for a Star Trek fan to remember. *Long Live* argues that Star Trek has always been a franchise interested in exploring enduring friendships and cross-cultural understandings as much as it is about exploring the unknown.

It models an affective engagement with transmedia aspects of Star Trek, reinforcing that it is a single story told across different media and many decades.

At first, *Harbor* (Llin, 2018) may seem similar to *Long Live*, not only because both are made by the same vidder, but because both reach across the broad scope of Star Trek history to condense and intensify something about the franchise. However, where *Long Live* constructs a fantasy of fellowship, *Harbor* (with song by Vienna Teng) constructs a version of Star Trek that highlights, as the vidder's note states, "the women of Star Trek and their friendships" by cutting around male characters, effectively excising them from this world. This fanvid revels in constructing a potential for comradeship, be it platonic or be it the romantic/sexual undercurrents that slash fans have exploited when they are presented with a homosocial space. It implicitly shows the limits of Star Trek for female characters as there are few moments that the vidder can leave out. *Harbor* argues that there is an irony in a franchise with such a prominent female fanbase nevertheless forcing fans to perform a painstaking hunt for these fragments and clips. However, this criticism stays implicit and the overt pleasures of the fanvid are in offering a space away from male-dominated narratives, and one where women of all definitions could potentially see themselves in this vision of the future.

The long history of Star Trek offers many possible directions for a vidder to rotate and pivot the hundreds of hours of video at their disposal, and to expose many unique facets of the franchise for their fellow fans. Fanvids show Star Trek as a franchise that rewards sustained engagement, where each instalment presents new stories, offering new facets to explore.

## **Conclusion**

As of the time of writing, fans have been re-using clips of Star Trek to make fanvids for more than forty years, and has been noted in scholarship for nearly thirty. A tradition of moving image re-use, vidding arguably began with TOS fandom, and has branched out to cover all manner of media in the years since, with early vidders such as Kandy Fong still attending conventions. Due to the availability of video editing options, fans who are not part of media fandom's vidding community also create short videos which set music to clips, though these tend to place greater emphasis on manipulation of image and sound than interpretation or critique. Turning to other media, anime fans have also been creating AMVs (anime music videos) for decades as well (Roberts 2012), and digital gaming has enabled machinima (Ito 2011). However, it is worth celebrating that a practice which started with TOS is still going strong today, practiced by a relatively small but dedicated global community.

In sum, fanvids are a form of experimental video art; they serve as responses to and interpretations of television and film, and—given the overwhelming lack of cisgendered men in vidding fandom—fanvids are potentially gendered interventions into media produced for a presumed male default spectator. At their core, fanvids are about pleasure and desire and offer a view into how fans have sought to capture, critique, and communicate their takes on the characters, settings, and broader potentials of Star Trek.

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