

## Video Game Fanvids as Paratexts and as Texts

*E. Charlotte Stevens, Birmingham City University*

In: *(Not) in the Game: History, Paratexts, and Games*. Edited by Regina Seiwald and Edwin Vollans. De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2023. 119-135.

This chapter discusses fanvids ('vids') that are made out of and about video games, which can be productively examined as paratexts of their source games and also texts in their own right. Vids are non-commercial fan works which use existing media to construct creative and critical analyses of that source material, with a history of production dating back to the late 1970s.<sup>1</sup> They are made by fans, for fans, and use clips from television, film, and other video sources cut to a song. Importantly, for the purposes of this collection, this includes recordings of video game play. In his discussion of film trailers and other media paratexts, Jonathan Gray also discusses vids, as one form of many "viewer-created paratexts," arguing that they construct a path through a text "leaving tracks for others to follow" similar to marginalia in a book.<sup>2</sup> Building on this, I argue that vids can be read as documentation of how an audience understood that series, film, game, celebrity, and so on.<sup>3</sup> Vids will articulate this understanding through clip choice, by drawing directly from the source (a straightforward task for films, games with a story, novels, etc.) or juxtaposing clips with the vidsong's lyrics to achieve these ends.<sup>4</sup>

However, as video games are different to film and television, video game vids have the potential to highlight the affective and experiential aspects of gameplay as well as interpretation of themes or character development. For this chapter, I will work with existing definitions of (and perspectives on) the idea of a 'paratext,' in aid of working through this case study of what happens after a game has been played. The finality of 'has been played' is intended to suggest a point at which a player has come to the end of a narrative and can use

---

<sup>1</sup> Francesca Coppa, "Women, Star Trek, and the Early Development of Fannish Vidding," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 1 (2008); Francesca Coppa, "A Brief History of Media Fandom," in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays*, ed. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2006), 41–59; Katharina Freund, "'Becoming a Part of the Storytelling': Fan Vidding Practices and Histories," in *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies*, ed. Paul Booth (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2018), 207–223.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* (New York: NYU Press, 2010), 154.

<sup>3</sup> E. Charlotte Stevens, *Fanvids: Television, Women, and Home Media Re-Use*, Transmedia (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> For example, vids made of YouTube star Maru the cat, reality TV and lifestyle vloggers, or puzzle games like *Baba is You* (2019) use their song soundtracks to find narrative or development.

that experience to guide creating a vid: in this case, a work that returns to characters, themes, experiences that has a different outcome to the repetition and replay normally raised in relation to sustained engagement with video games.<sup>5</sup> With a nod to Gray and to Jason Mittell,<sup>6</sup> Martin Barker notes “paratexts’ doubled nature: they are themselves already evidence of particular kinds of audience response; but they are also invitations to others to engage in specific ways.”<sup>7</sup> A game vid therefore leaves tracks for others to follow, offering evidence of an affective response to an experience of gameplay, and presents the game in question to an audience trained in watching vids who may or may not have played the game on their own.

My purpose here is first to explore the paratextual qualities of vids made from the reboot *Tomb Raider* (2013) and indie game *Transistor* (2014). This chapter will then pick up on the historiographical qualities of vids to discuss examples made from multiple games in the *Zelda* and *Mass Effect* franchises, finishing with a vid that memorialises the summer of the *Pokémon Go* (2016) craze.

### **What are vids and how are they made?**

A vid is a non-commercial fanwork that repurposes media texts, by editing together clips from existing video sources in time to a song. Vidding began with television – in “media fandom,” so-called to distinguish themselves from “literary science fiction fandom” which was less welcoming to female *Star Trek* fans<sup>8</sup> – but quickly expanded to encompass all variety of visual (and non-visual, e.g., book and podcast<sup>9</sup>) media sources. Early vids were made on videotape, and were frequently known as “song tapes,” with “fan music video” and then fanvid/vid settling as dominant terminology within media fandom.<sup>10</sup> Vids approximate music videos in appearance and duration, and music choice is essential to structuring a vid’s argument,<sup>11</sup> and

---

<sup>5</sup> Christopher Hanson, *Game Time: Understanding Temporality in Video Games*, Digital Game Studies (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), 110–134.

<sup>6</sup> Gray, *Show Sold Separately*; Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Martin Barker, “Speaking of ‘Paratexts’: A Theoretical Revisitation,” *Journal of Fandom Studies* 5, no. 3 (2017): 236.

<sup>8</sup> Coppa, “A Brief History of Media Fandom.”

<sup>9</sup> Stevens, *Fanvids*, 19–20.

<sup>10</sup> Stevens, 28; Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, Studies in Culture and Communication (New York: Routledge, 1992), 228–254.

<sup>11</sup> Tisha Turk, “Transformation in a New Key: Music in Vids and Vidding,” *Music, Sound, and the Moving Image* 9, no. 2 (2015): 163–176; Francesca Coppa, “A Fannish Taxonomy of Hotness,” *Cinema Journal* 48, no. 4 (2009): 107–113; Stevens, *Fanvids*.

to guide the audience's affective response as they watch.<sup>12</sup> Tisha Turk adopts the principle of “synchresis”<sup>13</sup> – a synchronisation of sound and image – as coined by Michel Chion to articulate how vidders construct and how vid-watchers decode the density of meaning that exists in a vid.<sup>14</sup> This chapter acknowledges the centrality of syncretic relationships and uses lyrics as a shorthand in highlighting key moments of significance in each vid.

In thinking about games and history, vids can be understood as historiographies, or works that write a history of engagement with a television series or film, and encompasses a holistic experience of that work wherein “the [vid] form’s inherent reflexivity demands that the vid be viewed and read alongside the viewer’s memory and understanding of its source series as a whole.”<sup>15</sup> For vids made of non-interactive media (television series, films, etc.), this memory and understanding is based in watching the source themselves and awareness of conversations and framings of that source material more generally. That said, it is possible to watch and understand a vid made out of unfamiliar material if one is sufficiently familiar with conventions of the vid form,<sup>16</sup> or knows enough about the source through its paratexts – a process media fandom calls fannish/fandom osmosis<sup>17</sup> – to be able to parse the characters, setting, relationships, and so forth. However, for vids made of interactive media (that is, video games), that memory and understanding operates in a slightly different register because the experience of playing a game is not the same as watching a television series. Game vids are not machinima (a once-popular use of a game engine to produce novel animations), nor other re-workings that repurpose a game for new ends (mods, hacks), but are instead a form of players’ textual productivity (fan fiction, fan art) that focuses on game narratives.<sup>18</sup> Game vids sit in between the two kinds of fan activity typified by mods and fan fiction: they are not interventions into

---

<sup>12</sup> Sebastian F. K. Svegaard, “‘All the Feels’: Music, Affect and Critique in Vids” (PhD diss., Birmingham, UK, Birmingham City University, 2022).

<sup>13</sup> Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

<sup>14</sup> Turk, “Transformation in a New Key.”

<sup>15</sup> Stevens, *Fanvids*, 130.

<sup>16</sup> Stevens, 17.

<sup>17</sup> Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson, “Identity, Ethics, and Fan Privacy,” in *Fan Culture: Theory/Practice* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 38–56; Paul Booth, “Introduction: SuperWhoLock Fandom: Fandoms Crossed,” in *Crossing Fandoms: SuperWhoLock and the Contemporary Fan Audience*, ed. Paul Booth (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016), 1–27.

<sup>18</sup> Garry Crawford, *Video Gamers* (Routledge, 2012). See also Matt Hills, “Fiske’s ‘textual productivity’ and digital fandom: Web 2.0 democratization versus fan distinction?” *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies* 10, no. 1 (2013): 130–153.

the mechanics nor mechanisms of a game, nor necessarily riffing on the stories told, but historicise the affective and experiential aspects of gameplay.

Due to the fact that vids are made out of video clips taken from existing media, to explore vidding is also to encounter ideas of media archiving and media history and how fanworks can provide a record of fans' interpretation of the vid's source material. Older vids, made on videotape or using digital transfers of off-air recordings, unwittingly preserve something of the way television fans kept their own collections of episodes before the convenience (and clean footage) of a box set.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, multifandom vids that use clips from more than one source offer up a tour of the vidder's take on a genre or franchise.<sup>20</sup> Vids made from and about video games offer similar potential for documenting interpretation of a player's path through a game; however, scholarship interested in creative/critical re-uses of video games has tended to focus on machinima rather than the potential found in vids.<sup>21</sup> (An exception is Sebastian Svegaard's thesis on music and vidding, which analyses a vid made from *Mass Effect Andromeda*.<sup>22</sup>) Where 'fanvids' are mentioned in these texts, scholars appear to rely on secondary sources that discuss vidding to make claims for proximate forms of fan-created video, and in doing so mischaracterise vidding.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, this chapter's discussion of game vids addresses an established practice of fan/player re-use of games that has not yet been substantially accounted for in literature. It also argues for the historiographical aspect of vidding: vids capture vidders' interpretation and can be read as an account of that past activity.

## Methods for studying fanworks

There has been a methodological consolidation of late in fandom studies, with a recent edited collection and special issue of *Transformative Works and Cultures* interrogating the range of

---

<sup>19</sup> E. Charlotte Stevens, "On Vidding: The Home Media Archive and Vernacular Historiography," in *Cult Media: Re-Packaged, Re-Released and Restored*, ed. Jonathan Wroot and Andy Willis (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 143–159.

<sup>20</sup> Stevens, *Fanvids*, 137–178.

<sup>21</sup> Mizuko Ito, "Machinima in a Fanvid Ecology," *Journal of Visual Culture* 10, no. 1 (1 April 2011): 51–54; Matthew Brett Freedman, "Machinima and Copyright Law," *Journal of Intellectual Property Law* 13, no. 1 (2005): 235–254; Henry Lowood, "A 'Different Technical Approach'? Introduction to the Special Issue on Machinima," *Journal of Visual Culture* 10, no. 1 (April 2011): 3–5; Henry Lowood, "High-Performance Play: The Making of Machinima," *Journal of Media Practice* 7, no. 1 (2006): 25–42.

<sup>22</sup> Svegaard, "All the Feels!"

<sup>23</sup> Jackie Marsh, "The Discourses of Celebrity in the Fanvid Ecology of Club Penguin Machinima," in *Discourse and Digital Practices*, ed. Rodney H. Jones, Alice Chik and Christoph A. Hafner (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2015), 193–208; Manuel Garin, "Super Mario, the New Silent Clown: Video Game Parodies as Transformative Comedy Tools," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 18, no. 3 (1 May 2015): 305–309.

ways to study fandoms and fanworks.<sup>24</sup> An “incredibly multi-inter-para-disciplinary field,” fandom studies has anthropological and therefore ethnographic roots in its approach in individuals and communities.<sup>25</sup> This is complicated by how those of us who study fandom tend to be “in fandom” ourselves<sup>26</sup> and even if we are not participants in the communities under study we often will have a good working knowledge of fan communities in general.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, even when a study does not contain interviews or direct observation, scholarship about fanworks (such as vids) will still be “fundamentally grounded in the scholar’s understanding of the text in question and its cultural context.”<sup>28</sup> In practice, accounting for this grounding means that fandom studies “relies on the use of ethnographic methods,”<sup>29</sup> and therefore an extra layer of care must be taken when presenting one’s findings: this includes using the vidder’s chosen pseudonym to identify their work.<sup>30</sup> Accordingly, this chapter will not provide URLs to individual vids, to limit link-scraping in online publication, but will provide sufficient identifying information should you wish to seek them out.

This chapter is a textual analysis, insofar as it shares my readings of the vids’ apparent aims and arguments, but it is inspired by V.F. Perkins’s aim to present a film “as it exists for the spectator”<sup>31</sup> with interpretation done “on the basis of its form and on the basis of our experience.”<sup>32</sup> This approach allows me to theorise how game vids can function in relation to their source video; any comments about reception are based on online comments left by viewers, where available, or from my observations during vidshow screenings.<sup>33</sup> In line with

---

<sup>24</sup> Julia E. Largent, Milena Popova and Elise Vist, eds., Special Issue: Fan Studies Methodologies, *Transformative Works and Cultures* 33 (2020), <https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/issue/view/59>; Rebecca Williams and Paul Booth, eds., *Fan Studies: Methods, Ethics, Research* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2021).

<sup>25</sup> Julia E. Largent, Milena Popova and Elise Vist, “Toward Some Fanons of Fan Studies [Editorial],” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 33 (2020), <https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/issue/view/59>.

<sup>26</sup> Adrienne E. Raw, “Rhetorical Moves in Disclosing Fan Identity in Fandom Scholarship,” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 33 (15 June 2020), <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2020.1731>.

<sup>27</sup> Abby Waysdorf, “Placing Fandom, Studying Fans: Modified Acafandom in Practice,” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 33 (15 June 2020), <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2020.1739>.

<sup>28</sup> Stevens, *Fanvids*, 51.

<sup>29</sup> Raw, “Rhetorical Moves in Disclosing Fan Identity in Fandom Scholarship,” para. 1.1.

<sup>30</sup> Busse and Hellekson, “Identity, Ethics,” 45; Kristina Busse, “The Ethics of Studying Online Fandom,” in *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom*, ed. Melissa A. Click and Suzanne Scott (New York: Routledge, 2018), 9–17; Louisa Ellen Stein, *Millennial Fandom: Television Audiences in the Transmedia Age* (University of Iowa Press, 2015), 178, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt20p587m>.

<sup>31</sup> V.F. Perkins, *Film as Film: Understanding and Judging Movies* (Penguin Books, 1972), 27.

<sup>32</sup> Perkins, 174.

<sup>33</sup> Stevens, *Fanvids*, 59–60.

vidding's proximate relationship to amateur video art,<sup>34</sup> and its persistent exhibition-based culture, the vast majority of these were screened at fan conventions. Over the course of my research I viewed scores of game vids at fan conventions and individually on my own computer, including those made using older PC games (e.g. *Myst*, *MechWarrior 4: Vengeance*), triple-A console titles (e.g. *Mass Effect*, *Tomb Raider*), indie games (e.g. *Baba is You*, *Transistor*) and mobile games (e.g. *Monument Valley*); my examples for this chapter illustrate a range of responses by vidders to games, and were chosen to highlight different aspects of theorisation. To view the vids again, I accessed the blog posts and other non-publication platforms vidders use to 'release' and archive their work. In this chapter, I borrow fandom terminology and refer to these framings and release notes as vid posts. There are also a range of complementary traditions of moving image re-use, from gallery-based found footage work to online groups such as Creaspace.ru and collectives operating solely on YouTube, and I have used my discretion and knowledge of media fandom's vidding community to choose my sample.<sup>35</sup>

### Vids as paratexts

This section explores how game vids may be productively understood as paratexts, or at least as paratextual. My purpose is to open up a space in which testing out different labels can offer ways of thinking through how players account for their experience of a game or gaming franchise. How is a game vid a paratext? Jonathan Gray offers primary/secondary textuality in place of text/paratext to discuss the relationship between two media objects, depending on the angle of approach from a viewer or player.<sup>36</sup> If the game itself has primary textuality, then a vid will be secondary; indeed, a vid cannot be made without available footage. This is unlike a film poster, which exists before and without the film it is advertising. Vids made from games need a game to have been played to have generated the video source used by the vidder. Taking

---

<sup>34</sup> Stevens, *Fanvids*, 65–96.

<sup>35</sup> The vids discussed in the chapter are sometimes posted or tagged with "GMV" (game music video), which follows the naming convention of AMV (anime music videos), as a way to increase discoverability to broader audiences. In the case of *Yellow Flicker Beat* (Mithborien, 2015), it was posted to YouTube as a GMV but made for a media fandom vidding event (Festivids) and crossposted to Archive of Our Own, an archive built by and for media fandom. Parody trailers, machinima, and other kinds of internet-based recuts exist and are beyond the scope of this discussion; vidding and AMVs pre-date these newer digital forms. See also: Ian Roberts, "Genesis of the Digital Anime Music Video Scene, 1990–2001 [Multimedia]," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 9 (15 March 2012), <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2012.0365>.

<sup>36</sup> Gray, *Show Sold Separately*, 39.

this into consideration, game vids are unequivocally secondary texts, holding a subsidiary and therefore paratextual relationship to the game itself.

Similar to trailers, then, game vids frame an approach to a primary/central text by arranging bits of gameplay and cutscenes to show off key features and attractions of the game. This material can either be generated and captured by the vidder or gathered from clips and playthroughs posted online. However, it would be a mistake to argue that vids *are* trailers, as they are neither commercial endeavours nor parodies thereof.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, they are framed by their makers as variations on the music video form, not as iterations of a promotional discourse associated with the sale of goods or services. A vid's structure is guided by the soundtrack's lyrics and aural qualities, with attention paid to rhythm in the cuts, use of motion, and clips carefully chosen to inform (or create) thematic resonances. This aesthetic work is more like a subjective product review, to extend the marketing analogy, designed to capture and share the vidder/player's personal history of engagement with a media text that scribbles in a game's margins which leaves a record of interpretation. Some vids are motivated by an attempt to recoup the source material's potential, for example to introduce an emotional coherence lacking in the source. Sometimes the purpose is to highlight gameplay itself, as with *Our House* (elipie, 2016), a vid made from *The Sims* sequels that glories in glitches and other digital hiccups and carries an implicit sense that the point of playing a Sims game is to find, capture, and share these ruptures.

One straightforward example, *Yellow Flicker Beat* (Mithborien, 2015), was made from the indie game *Transistor* (2014) for the annual Festivids vidding gift exchange.<sup>38</sup> This vid focuses on the player character, Red, making use of the song's lyrics about having been famous and now seeking vengeance. The song is from Lorde's soundtrack for *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay, Part 1* (2014); fittingly, its first-person narrative gives voice to Red, whose voice is stolen at the start of the game. The vid uses aesthetic as well as narrative congruence to make its point, with lyrics "red, orange, yellow flicker beat" heard as appropriately coloured clips are shown, and the on-screen prompt text in clips taken from gameplay appear on the beat. Returning to the idea that the purpose and function of a fan-made paratext is to guide

---

<sup>37</sup> Kathleen Amy Williams, "Fake and Fan Film Trailers as Incarnations of Audience Anticipation and Desire," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 9 (2012); Ed Vollans, "So Just What is a Trailer, Anyway?" *Arts and the Market* 5, no. 2 (2015): 112–125.

<sup>38</sup> Stevens, *Fanvids*, 53.

interactions with a text – as Barker says, “as already-generated audience responses and as sources of influence on others”<sup>39</sup> – comments on the vid post indicate that it worked both as an enticement to play the game (replies suggesting folks had purchased the game), and as a condensed adaptation (other replies noting the vidder had captured what others had loved about the game). This atmospheric vid offers some demonstration of mechanics, and revels in the game’s art style, but more significantly suggests that the game’s appeal for a player is through the experience of a female-centred narrative in a cool retro-cyberpunk setting. However, any enticement here to play *Transistor* is not a sales job, but an invitation to join in the vidder’s enjoyment of something which already exists.

In contrast, *We Got the Power* (Isagel, 2014), a *Tomb Raider* (2013) vid, presents a queer reading of player character Lara Croft. *Tomb Raider* is a long-running franchise whose protagonist has been the subject of critical debate in and beyond academia.<sup>40</sup> (Is she for straight men to ogle? For women to identify with? For men to ‘try out’ identifying with a female perspective? For lesbians to desire?) The 2013 reboot uses a more ‘realist’ character design, but employs a narrative that directs threats of sexual violence towards Croft, and gameplay that sees genre-typical failures accumulate into repeated acts of trauma on a female body. *We Got the Power* asks why she would put herself through extremely taxing physical situations (she is not raiding tombs for profit, for example), and it answers that question by cutting together clips of cutscenes and active gameplay sequences to argue that she is motivated by love for the woman she rescues from the cult at the end of the game. This vid is arguably an example of “queer game play that is not about finding the ‘real’ meaning of a game text, but playing between the lines with queer reading tactics”<sup>41</sup> as it uses clips from the game to provide evidence for this reading of its events to document and textualise that queer reading. This vid shows how meaning is made across both puzzles/gameplay and plot-advancing cutscenes, and that there is little difference between these two parts of the game in how character motivations

---

<sup>39</sup> Barker, “Speaking of ‘Paratexts’,” 236.

<sup>40</sup> See, for example: Adrienne Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 55–96; Esther MacCallum-Stewart, “‘Take That, Bitches!’ Refiguring Lara Croft in Feminist Game Narratives,” *Game Studies* 14, no. 2 (2014); Helen Kennedy, “Lara Croft: Feminist Icon or Cyberbimbo? On the Limits of Textual Analysis,” *Game Studies* 2, no. 2 (2002); Maja Mikula, “Gender and Videogames: The Political Valency of Lara Croft,” *Continuum* 17, no. 1 (2003): 79–87; Anne-Marie Schleiner, “Does Lara Croft Wear Fake Polygons? Gender and Gender-Role Subversion in Computer Adventure Games,” *Leonardo* 34, no. 3 (1 June 2001).

<sup>41</sup> Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw, “Introduction: Imagining Queer Game Studies,” in *Queer Game Studies*, ed. Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), x.



are read and understood. The vidder plays between the lines to find a queer reading in *Tomb Raider* and uses the vid form to communicate that interpretation – in other words, creates a vid designed to both document a personal response to the game and also influence spectators in their potential future engagement with that property.

Interestingly, the makers of *Yellow Flicker Beat* and *We Got the Power* used vid posts and panel discussions at vidding conventions to discuss, respectively, how they cut around the mouse arrow appearing on screen and how to create a digital mask for the persistent crosshairs in a first-person game. This conscious (and literal) masking of the player's own immediate embodiment to provide 'clean' footage is something that is due further consideration.

### **Vids as texts**

This section addresses the slippage – and slipperiness – at play in identifying a vid as text or paratext. I have previously, breezily, declared vids to be paratexts, since a vid is “a fan-led extension of the source material” in a network of official and unofficial transmedia production.<sup>42</sup> This present collection has prompted me to revisit that position, and to think about how vids can be both text and paratext at the same time.<sup>43</sup> However, as discussed earlier, vids are more than trailers as vids can fulfil a range of functions and have different purposes for their viewers. Barker's assertion that, for Genette, a paratext is useful to help a reader parse authorial intent,<sup>44</sup> raises the issue of attempting to find an easy equation between (for example) a book's flyleaf and a fanvid to make a strict definition of paratext have utility. As discussed elsewhere in this volume, games are authored collectively by a production team, with players' actions contribution a further dimension of meaning-making.<sup>45</sup> With game vids, a vidder also inhabits an author-role through their editorial work. (Vids might also be metatexts, given their commentary/criticism on source material, if not for vidders' close proximity to meaning-making). This section of the chapter explores by which terms game vids can be understood as paratexts and texts simultaneously, especially as vids are arguably adaptations (and histories) in their own right, consumed without an expectation that the source material will be played or watched.

---

<sup>42</sup> Stevens, *Fanvids*, 10.

<sup>43</sup> See Regina Seiwald, Chapter 1.

<sup>44</sup> Barker, “Speaking of ‘Paratexts’,” 241.

<sup>45</sup> See Regina Seiwald, Chapter 1.

All vids, game vids included, are records of interpretation. They are circulated and consumed by fans as texts in their own right. While vids are made out of pieces of their source material, there is a fuzziness that invites comparisons to adaptation and transmedia – in both cases we are comfortable treating parts of a whole as separate entities for analysis. I contend that game vidding can stand on its own as a vidder’s work of historiography, insofar as vidding is about “gathering artefacts [clips] and then using them to write a story” in video form.<sup>46</sup> As discussed above, vids are made out of existing material, and these ‘found’ videos (gameplay recordings, cutscenes) could productively be considered as archival sources.

A very clear example of how vidding can be used to write a history of gaming is the Legend of Zelda vid *The Hero’s Journey* (thedeadparrot, 2020). This example uses Let’s Plays from seven different games in the series, from *A Link to the Past* (1991) through *Skyward Sword* (2011), cut to an instrumental piece titled “The Maelstrom” by Jim Guthrie. The vid exploits the fact that the player character is regularly centred in the frame to shift focus and enable a viewer’s consideration of (at minimum) evidence of the development of gaming graphics through this example. Rather than a functional consideration of how the avatar can be used to complete the game, this is a sustained engagement with games once they have been played, drawing out an affective history with video games beyond their replay value.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, the vid post contains an essay about the vidder’s love for the franchise, and comments on the vid post note the scope of the footage as part of commending the vidder’s effort. As a collection of Let’s Plays, *The Hero’s Journey* has a curatorial edge to it, as it selects and positions each individual gamer’s recording of their own individual gameplay experiences as the authoritative evocation of each game in the franchise and combines them to give the viewer an impression of what it has been like to be a longstanding Zelda fan. The act of interpreting evidence from an archive is the work of a historian; this work is performed in this vid.

The work a vid does as interpretation is based on personal understandings, but also can be understood in relation to a vidder’s sense of where the source material sits in the community. As Chris Louttit points out in relation to vids made of Jane Austen adaptations, “an important frame for the ‘creative’ and ‘interpretive’ act that is the fan video is the work and commentary

---

<sup>46</sup> Stevens, “On Vidding,” 148. See Regina Seiwald, Chapter 1.

<sup>47</sup> See also Rebecca Williams, *Post-Object Fandom: Television, Identity and Self-Narrative* (New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).

of others active in the community.”<sup>48</sup> Overtly reflexive television vid examples include Counteragent’s *Still Alive* (2008)<sup>49</sup> and lim’s *Us* (2007),<sup>50</sup> which both directly comment on specific aspects of media fandom. Tisha Turk argues that vid-making and vid-watching are acts of collaborative interpretation;<sup>51</sup> vids respond to and are made for a community’s shared understanding of, for example, character motivations or thematic meanings. Vids are made to be shown to other fans, and therefore draw on and are part of discourses in fan communities about the vids’ source material. In the case of game vids, a motivation for making a vid can be to use clips from the game to stand as evidence in an argument that counters loud player disapproval of, as in the next example, the ending of *Mass Effect 3*.

The *Mass Effect* trilogy vid *With Blood* (beccatoria, 2013) also uses gameplay captured by a range of YouTubers to account for meaningful choice in the contentious ending of the third game, in which there were not multiple possible endings.<sup>52</sup> Comments on the vid post make it clear that the vidder’s intention was to note how each individual’s experience of *Mass Effect* is ultimately the same story for all players regardless of choice, and to find value in the wealth of variations that lead to the same end. Key to the success of the vid’s argument is the high degree of customisability in the player character, Commander Shepard, who can be male or female, with a range of appearances, backstories, and personalities chosen at the start of the game; elements of the narrative and potential for romance are then affected by choices made through gameplay. The vid textualises the customisability of the game by showing different experiences of *Mass Effect*, including the game’s optional queerness, by cross-cutting the same pieces of narrative that show different avatars, romantic partners, and the surviving non-player character from an event at the end of the first game. Since players capture and share their

---

<sup>48</sup> Chris Louttit, “Remixing Period Drama: The Fan Video and the Classic Novel Adaptation,” *Adaptation* 6, no. 2 (2013), 181.

<sup>49</sup> Katharina Freund, “‘I’m Glad We Got Burned, Think of All the Things We Learned’: Fandom Conflict and Context in Counteragent’s ‘Still Alive,’” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 4 (2010); Louisa Ellen Stein, “Vidding: Remix as Affective Media Literacy,” *Intermedialités: Histoire et Théorie Des Arts, Des Lettres et Des Techniques / Intermediality: History and Theory of the Arts, Literature and Technologies* 23 (2014).

<sup>50</sup> Alexis Lothian, “Living in a Den of Thieves: Fan Video and Digital Challenges to Ownership,” *Cinema Journal* 48, no. 4 (2009): 130–136; Svegaard, “All the Feels!”

<sup>51</sup> Tisha Turk, “‘Your Own Imagination’: Vidding and Vidwatching as Collaborative Interpretation,” *Film & Film Culture* 5 (2010): 88–110.

<sup>52</sup> Jacqueline Burgess and Christian M. Jones, “‘Is It Too Much to Ask That We’re Allowed to Win the Game?’: Character Attachment and Agency in the Mass Effect 3 Ending Controversy,” *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society* 37, no. 3 (2017): 146–158; Sarah Christina Ganzon, “Control, Destroy, Merge, Refuse, Retake: Players, the Author Function and the Mass Effect Ending Controversy,” in *Words, Worlds, Narratives: Transmedia and Immersion*, ed. Tawnya Ravy and Eric Forcier (Brill e-book, 2014), 127–146.

gameplay footage online, a vidder can combine these variations; *With Blood* drives home this customisability with a space orgy sequence that gathers couplings between different Shepards and non-player characters, with each pairing the manifest result of player choice. In contrast to *The Hero's Journey*, *With Blood* positions the various avatars as indicative of different ways of playing through the trilogy, in an affective and empathetic imagining of alternative possibilities in how the game unfolds, regardless of the final game's ending.

Annika Waern notes that the customisability of *Dragon Age* avatars (another series by Bioware, *Mass Effect's* studio), and the ambiguity of the role-playing options, means the emotional boundary blurs between the character and player.<sup>53</sup> *With Blood* offers a chance for the viewer to reflect on the intensity of identification with *their* Shepard: it's in seeing the suite of *other* options, the other possible Shepards and stories, that the vid reminds a viewer that their experience of *Mass Effect* was individual, even though it comes to the same end. Indeed, text on screen at the end of the vid ("All Shepards choose to save you.") makes it clear there is only ever one outcome here. Interestingly, the 1<sup>st</sup>-person lyrics which appear to be expressing the Shepards' feelings for their crew (with a collective "you") could also be addressing the viewer, splitting the avatar from the player and offering Shepard a semblance of autonomy and agency in describing their own experience of the narrative. With this example, the question of authorship in considering the paratextuality of the vid becomes starker: many different players' footage appears in this vid, as it catalogues, combines, and historicises many different sets of choices and potential experiences. Limiting authorship to Bioware, and allocating primary textuality to *Mass Effect* alone, excludes the players' interpretive work in documenting their experience, and implies beccatoria's response to the trilogy is similar to (perhaps) a designer creating a book jacket. Thinking of *With Blood* as a text honours the critical and affective labour undertaken in its production and credits a vidder's ability to advance coherent historical and analytical accounts of games and player experience.

Finally, and briefly, the *Pokémon Go* vid *500 Miles* (elipie, 2017) goes beyond gameplay itself to create a memorialisation of the so-called "summer of *Pokémon Go*" that followed the game's release in July 2016. The vid writes a history of an experience shared by players and non-players alike, which is cited in the vid through gathered news footage and collections of

---

<sup>53</sup> Annika Waern, "'I'm in Love with Someone That Doesn't Exist!' Bleed in the Context of a Computer Game," *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds* 3, no. 3 (2011): 239–257.

headlines, alongside marketing clips for the game, fan-shot footage of players gathering in public, and social media posts of entertaining augmented reality screenshots. *500 Miles* textualises gameplay to the extreme – unusually for a game vid, we see people playing the game – and also offers an extended definition of play that includes interaction on social media, glitches, failures (such as being so absorbed in the game that a player walks into a piece of public art or off a dock into the water), and pleasure in AR juxtapositions that put different Pokémon in absurd or amusing situations. The vid’s soundtrack, “500 Miles” by The Proclaimers, can be taken as a reference to both the central mechanism of the game (walking many miles) and the figurative distance players would go to organise their life around the product. Therefore, *500 Miles* documents a performance of engagement with *Pokémon Go* that creates an affective historicisation of that summer’s activity. This example of textual productivity uses records of gameplay to talk about gameplay and allows for an intervention into these spaces and practices. Game vids offer evidence of a player’s interpretation of a game, and they textualise identification with or investment in these products.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, game vids offer one venue for players to extend their engagement with a game once it has been played. For the vidder, through the process of vidding, they return to and highlight key moments, gestures, and settings that are key to their interpretation of the game/franchise and of their gameplay experience. This experience can and will extend beyond a playthrough of a single game text and encompass a range of paratexts. A game vid offers a similar return to a familiar game, offering a capsule version of another player/vidder’s experience to compare with their own. However, and particularly for game vids that are shown at conventions alongside vids using film, television and other game source, the vids’ viewers may not have played (or even have heard of) the game being vided and therefore the vid holds primary textuality as an “entryway paratext.”<sup>54</sup> In my experience of playing *Transistor* after watching *Yellow Flicker Beat*, my memory of the vid’s mood followed me into playing, as I chased the feeling promised by the vid. Studying game vids is not a substitute for ethnography, but game vids offer a set of (para)texts which encounter the narrative, spectacle and emotion involved in gameplay, through both the sustained engagement with a media text and the memorialisation of that activity are communicated through the vid.

---

<sup>54</sup> Gray, *Show Sold Separately*, 35.

Game vids, or rather the act of watching game vids, opens space for reflection on the different possible ways of experiencing a game beyond playing it. Watching a streamer (or a sibling or friend) as they play and engaging with reviews (either reading or watching) are ways we can experience a game without directly exerting agency over outcomes when points of meaningful choice are offered. More than a highlight reel, a game vid leverages its soundtrack to construct an affective memorialisation of the feelings and experiences of gameplay. The examples of game vids discussed in this chapter do not necessarily offer explicit critiques of their source material, but it is possible to use the vid form in this way.<sup>55</sup> Game vids do not often show players' failures within gameplay, something Jesper Juul suggested was fundamental to understanding the 'playing' of games.<sup>56</sup> Instead, the focus on successful gameplay and on cutscenes perhaps elides the effort of actually working through the game; or perhaps, for an audience literate in gaming, the unspoken failures are understood to be haunting these works. (An exception that proves the point is *500 Miles*.) Game vids do demonstrate one possible afterlife for digital games once the playthrough is completed, as a site of sustained engagement for a medium beyond its specific/intrinsic replay value.

## Acknowledgements

Earlier versions of this chapter were presented at: European Network for Cinema and Media Studies 2017, Console-ing Passions 2018, and Society for Cinema and Media Studies 2021. Thank you to colleagues who have offered feedback along the way. My gratitude goes to the vidders and to VJs who shared and curated game vids at fan conventions.

## References

- Barker, Martin. "Speaking of 'Paratexts': A Theoretical Revisitation." *Journal of Fandom Studies* 5, no. 3 (2017): 235–249. [https://doi.org/10.1386/JFS.5.3.235\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/JFS.5.3.235_1).
- BioWare. *Mass Effect*. Microsoft Game Studios/Electronic Arts. Xbox 360/PS3 and PC, 2007.
- BioWare. *Mass Effect 2*. Electronic Arts. Xbox 360/PC, 2010. PS3, 2011.
- BioWare. *Mass Effect 3*. Electronic Arts. Xbox 360/PC/PS3/Wii U, 2012.
- Bioware. *Mass Effect Andromeda*. Electronic Arts. PC/PS4/Xbox One, 2017.

---

<sup>55</sup> Svegaard, "All the Feels!"

<sup>56</sup> Jesper Juul, *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games*, Playful Thinking (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013). However, as discussed regarding *Our House*, game vids can delight in a game's failures, e.g. glitches.

- Booth, Paul. "Introduction: SuperWhoLock Fandom: Fandoms Crossed." In *Crossing Fandoms: SuperWhoLock and the Contemporary Fan Audience*, edited by Paul Booth, 1–27. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016. [https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-57455-8\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-57455-8_1).
- Burgess, Jacqueline, and Christian M. Jones. "'Is It Too Much to Ask That We're Allowed to Win the Game?' Character Attachment and Agency in the Mass Effect 3 Ending Controversy." *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society* 37, no. 3 (2017): 146–158. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0270467618819685>.
- Busse, Kristina. "The Ethics of Studying Online Fandom." In *The Routledge Companion to Media Fandom*, edited by Melissa A. Click and Suzanne Scott, 9–17. New York: Routledge, 2018.
- Busse, Kristina, and Karen Hellekson. "Identity, Ethics, and Fan Privacy." In *Fan Culture: Theory/Practice*, edited by Katherine Larsen and Lynn Zubernis, 38–56. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012.
- Chion, Michel. *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.
- Coppa, Francesca. "A Brief History of Media Fandom." In *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays.*, edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, 41–59. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2006.
- Coppa, Francesca. "A Fannish Taxonomy of Hotness." *Cinema Journal* 48, no. 4 (2009): 107–113. <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.0.0136>.
- Coppa, Francesca. "Women, Star Trek, and the Early Development of Fannish Vidding." *Transformative Works and Cultures* 1 (15 September 2008). <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2008.044>.
- Crawford, Garry. *Video Gamers*. Routledge, 2012.
- Crystal Dynamics. *Tomb Raider*. Square Enix. Xbox 360/PC/PS3, 2013.
- Cyan. *Myst*. Broderbund. Mac OS, 1993. PC, 1994.
- FASA Interactive. *MechWarrior 4: Vengeance*. Microsoft, 2000.
- Freedman, Matthew Brett. "Machinima and Copyright Law." *Journal of Intellectual Property Law* 13, no. 1 (2005): 235–254.
- Freund, Katharina. "'Becoming a Part of the Storytelling': Fan Vidding Practices and Histories." In *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies*, edited by Paul Booth, 207–223. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2018.

- Freund, Katharina. “‘I’m Glad We Got Burned, Think of All the Things We Learned’: Fandom Conflict and Context in Counteragent’s ‘Still Alive’.” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 4 (2010). <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2010.0187>.
- Ganzon, Sarah Christina. “Control, Destroy, Merge, Refuse, Retake: Players, the Author Function and the Mass Effect Ending Controversy.” In *Words, Worlds, Narratives: Transmedia and Immersion*, edited by Tawnya Ravy and Eric Forcier, 127–146. Leiden: Brill, 2014.
- Garin, Manuel. “Super Mario, the New Silent Clown: Video Game Parodies as Transformative Comedy Tools.” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 18, no. 3 (2015): 305–309. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877913513688>.
- Gray, Jonathan. *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*. New York: NYU Press, 2010.
- Hanson, Christopher. *Game Time: Understanding Temporality in Video Games*. Digital Game Studies. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2018.
- Hempuli. *Baba is You*. Hempuli. PC/Switch, 2019. iOS/Android, 2021.
- Hills, Matt. “Fiske’s ‘textual productivity’ and digital fandom: Web 2.0 democratization versus fan distinction?” *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies* 10, no. 1 (2013): 130–153.
- Ito, Mizuko. “Machinima in a Fanvid Ecology.” *Journal of Visual Culture* 10, no. 1 (2011): 51–54. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412910391557>.
- Jenkins, Henry. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. Studies in Culture and Communication. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Juul, Jesper. *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games*. Playful Thinking. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013.
- Kennedy, Helen. “Lara Croft: Feminist Icon or Cyberbimbo? On the Limits of Textual Analysis.” *Game Studies* 2, no. 2 (2002). <http://www.gamestudies.org/0202/kennedy/>
- Largent, Julia E., Milena Popova, and Elise Vist, eds. Special Issue: Fan Studies Methodologies. *Transformative Works and Cultures* 33 (2020). <https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/issue/view/59>.
- Largent, Julia E., Milena Popova, and Elise Vist, eds. “Toward Some Fanons of Fan Studies [Editorial].” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 33 (2020). <https://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/issue/view/59>.



- Lothian, Alexis. "Living in a Den of Thieves: Fan Video and Digital Challenges to Ownership." *Cinema Journal* 48, no. 4 (2009): 130–36. <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.0.0152>.
- Louttit, Chris. "Remixing Period Drama: The Fan Video and the Classic Novel Adaptation." *Adaptation* 6, no. 2 (2013): 172–86. <https://doi.org/10.1093/adaptation/apt005>.
- Lowood, Henry. "A Different Technical Approach"? Introduction to the Special Issue on Machinima." *Journal of Visual Culture* 10, no. 1 (April 2011): 3–5. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470412910391546>.
- Lowood, Henry. "High-Performance Play: The Making of Machinima." *Journal of Media Practice* 7, no. 1 (2006): 25–42. <https://doi.org/10.1386/jmpr.7.1.25/1>.
- MacCallum-Stewart, Esther. "'Take That, Bitches!' Refiguring Lara Croft in Feminist Game Narratives." *Game Studies* 14, no. 2 (2014). <http://gamestudies.org/1402/articles/maccallumstewart>.
- Marsh, Jackie. "The Discourses of Celebrity in the Fanvid Ecology of Club Penguin Machinima." In *Discourse and Digital Practices*, edited by Rodney H. Jones, Alice Chik and Christoph A. Hafner, 193–208. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2015.
- Mikula, Maja. "Gender and Videogames: The Political Valency of Lara Croft." *Continuum* 17, no. 1 (2003): 79–87. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1030431022000049038>.
- Mittell, Jason. *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*. New York: New York University Press, 2015.
- Niantic. *Pokémon Go*. Nintendo and The Pokémon Company. iOS/Android, 2016.
- Nintendo. *The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword*. Nintendo. Wii, 2011.
- Nintendo EAD. *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past*. Nintendo. SNES, 1991.
- Perkins, V. F. *Film as Film: Understanding and Judging Movies*. London: Penguin Books, 1972.
- Raw, Adrienne E. "Rhetorical Moves in Disclosing Fan Identity in Fandom Scholarship." *Transformative Works and Cultures* 33 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2020.1731>.
- Roberts, Ian. "Genesis of the Digital Anime Music Video Scene, 1990–2001 [Multimedia]." *Transformative Works and Cultures* 9 (2012). <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2012.0365>.
- Ruberg, Bonnie, and Adrienne Shaw. "Introduction: Imagining Queer Game Studies." In *Queer Game Studies*, edited by Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw, ix–xxxiii. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

- Schleiner, Anne-Marie. "Does Lara Croft Wear Fake Polygons? Gender and Gender-Role Subversion in Computer Adventure Games." *Leonardo* 34, no. 3 (2001): 221–226. <https://doi.org/10.1162/002409401750286976>.
- Shaw, Adrienne. *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture*. U of Minnesota Press, 2015.
- Stein, Louisa Ellen. *Millennial Fandom: Television Audiences in the Transmedia Age*. University of Iowa Press, 2015.
- Stein, Louisa Ellen. "Vidding: Remix as Affective Media Literacy." *Intermédialités : Histoire et Théorie Des Arts, Des Lettres et Des Techniques / Intermediality: History and Theory of the Arts, Literature and Technologies* 23 (2014). <https://doi.org/10.7202/1033338ar>.
- Stevens, E. Charlotte. *Fanvids: Television, Women, and Home Media Re-Use*. Transmedia. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020.
- Stevens, E. Charlotte. "On Vidding: The Home Media Archive and Vernacular Historiography." In *Cult Media: Re-Packaged, Re-Released and Restored*, edited by Jonathan Wroot and Andy Willis, 143–159. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.
- Supergiant Games. *Transistor*. Supergiant Games. PC/PS4, 2014.
- Svegaard, Sebastian F. K. "'All the Feels!': Music, Affect and Critique in Vids." PhD thesis, Birmingham City University, 2022.
- Turk, Tisha. "Transformation in a New Key: Music in Vids and Vidding." *Music, Sound, and the Moving Image* 9, no. 2 (2015): 163–176.
- Turk, Tisha. "'Your Own Imagination': Vidding and Vidwatching as Collaborative Interpretation." *Film & Film Culture* 5 (2010): 88–110.
- Vollans, Ed. "So just what is a Trailer, Anyway?" *Arts and the Market* 5, no. 2 (2015): 112–125. <https://doi.org/10.1108/AAM-07-2014-0026>.
- Waern, Annika. "'I'm in Love with Someone That Doesn't Exist!' Bleed in the Context of a Computer Game." *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds* 3, no. 3 (2011): 239–257. [https://doi.org/10.1386/jgvw.3.3.239\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/jgvw.3.3.239_1).
- Waysdorf, Abby. "Placing Fandom, Studying Fans: Modified Acafandom in Practice." *Transformative Works and Cultures* 33 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2020.1739>.
- Williams, Kathleen Amy. "Fake and Fan Film Trailers as Incarnations of Audience Anticipation and Desire." *Transformative Works and Cultures* 9 (2012). <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2012.0360>.

Williams, Rebecca. *Post-Object Fandom: Television, Identity and Self-Narrative*. New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015.

Williams, Rebecca, and Paul Booth, eds. *Fan Studies: Methods, Ethics, Research*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2021.