Alternate Universe Fan Videos and the Reinterpretation of the Media Source

Introduction

According to the Francesca Coppa, American scholar and co-founder of the *Organization for Transformative Works[1]*, fan videos are "a form of grassroots filmmaking in which clips from television shows and movies are set to music."[2] Fan videos are commonly referred to as: fanvid, songvid, vid, AMV (for Anime Music Video); their process of creation is called vidding and their editors (fan)vidders.

While the "media tradition" described above in Francesca Coppa's definition is a crucial part of the fan video production, many other fan videos are created for anime, especially Asian ones (AMV), for video games (some of them called Machinima), or even for other subjects, from band tributes to other types of remix.

The vidding tradition – in its current "shape" – goes back to the era of the first VCR; but the very first fan videos may be traced back to the seventies in a slideshow format. When channel mixers and numerous machines available to a large group of consumers emerged, this fan activity easily became an expanding one amongst the fan communities, who were often interested in new technology, whatever era it is. Vidding has now become a digital process, thanks to the expansion of computer and related technical means, including at least semiprofessional editing software. It seems relevant to point out how rare it is that a vidder goes through editing training when they begin to create fan videos, or even become a professional editor later on. Of course, exceptions exist, but vidding generally remains a hobby.

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[1] The *Organization for Transformative Works* is an international nonprofit organization, whose goal is to protect, archive and gather fan creations, which are transformative objects, including fan videos.
[2] Francesca Coppa, "Women, *Star Trek*, and the early development of fannish vidding." *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 1, 2008.

Like other types of fan creations, fan videos can be organized by categories, those being common or not within the other fan creations. The category that draws our interest here is called alternate universe. Those fan videos shows events that did not happen in the narrative of the media source, often referred to as "canon." It is a rather broad term since those fan videos often are a mix of alternate universe and other categories such as: gen (general), het (heterosexual), slash and femslash (gay and lesbian couples), shipper (couple centric fan videos), trailer, episodic, fanfiction/role-play based.[3]

In this vast spectrum that fan creations represent, how do alternate fan videos have particular interpretative characteristics? Those fan videos ask certain questions regarding their creative process, including from a technical point of view, but also in relation to their reception in the fan communities. Three main lines of research appear to answer the question above. The first one is the notion of fan video as "bricolage" with the creative stakes that it includes. The second one encompasses the technical stakes allowed by modern narrative tools that a vidder might have available. Finally, the final stakes are related to the audience from which those alternate universe fan videos benefit, with the numerous interpretative communities they might – or not – reach.

1. Creative Stakes: Fan Video as "Bricolage"

The viewer's autonomy and the impact they have on their creativity reminds one of Michel de Certeau's writings and theories, especially when he talks about the relation between reader and media:

> Anyway, their extended autonomy doesn't preserve the reader, because it is on their imaginationthat media expand their power, which means on all that the reader let come of themselves in the textual webs – their fears, their dreams, their fantasized and

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[3] "The most active form of audience engagement comes in role-playing clubs. Fans of fantasy literature from Tolkien to space operas have joined together for live-action role-playing (LARP) games in which they assume the roles of characters in the original stories to make up new characters within the same fictional universe." (Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 1997, 42).

> missing authorities. On those play the powers that make a rhetoric from figures and "facts," that targets this delivered intimacy.[4]

This approach seems very applicable to the vidding notion, including in the alternate universe case. Each vidder is indeed interested in different aspects of the media source: character, couple, narrative arc, and will more specifically explore them in their fan videos. It is nevertheless possible that the subjects may be more of a challenge in nature, said challenge being personal or set up, as this is common on some internet fan sites or communities.

It is about choosing in the media source what will appear in the fan video, depending on the vidder's creative wishes. Still with De Certeau's work in mind, it is common to put this vision in relation with the "poaching" notion. This concept was also (re)developed by the American academic and fan studies specialist Henry Jenkins in numerous writings, from *Textual Poachers*[5] (1992) to *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers*[6] (2006) for example.

This aspect of alternate universe fan videos has an important influence on the technical dimension of their creative process. Their editing will then use narrative tools more specific for this category, even though they can be used for all types of fan videos.

2. Technical Stakes: Narrative Tools

French academic Vincent Amiel's words about editing in the digital era seem important to include for the studies of alternate universe fan videos, even though Amiel has worked on the "real" film industry, rather than its appropriation and recreation by fans:

> Virtual editing also includes other artifices of the digitalized image: it allows incrustations, modifications within the image, and combinations within the frame. [...] Between the images like within any of them, this is indeed an infinite combination choice

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[4] Michel de Certeau, *L'invention du quotidien 1. Arts de faire*, 1990, 254-255.

[5] "A fan aesthetic centers on the selection, inflection, juxtaposition, and recirculation of ready-made images and discourses. In short, a poached culture requires a conception of aesthetics emphasizing borrowing and recombination as much aor more as original creation and artistic innovation." (Jenkins, 1992, 223-224).

[6] "Far from viewing consumption as imposing meanings upon the public, de Certeau suggests, consumption involves reclaiming textual material [...]." (Jenkins, 2006, 40).

that digital editing invite to, where traditional practice only allowed for cuts, or at its best, adjustments.[7]

Fan videos rely on different types of tools and techniques: mostly clean cuts or fades when it comes to transitions, zooms, cropping, overlays – either visual or audio, masks, color effects, cut scenes or scenes coming from different versions – still pictures, clips external to the original media source and to the fandom the video will belong to in the end. Diverse narrative tools, made possible by the versatility of digital editing even when only semi-professional, allow mixing different clips to show certain events or characters' relationships. Alternate universe fan videos that often require a lot of work on the clips have greatly benefited from technical improvements and their availability to greater consumption.

Overlays, masks, cropping, and color effects are often used from a symbolic point of view in fan videos, but also to create new discourse possibilities. This is the case for a "clip" showing a couple that does not exist as such in the original fandom, but might be generated from different image sources. It is normal that vidders who are able to use semiprofessional software (*SonyVegas*, *AdobePremiere* for example) at an intermediate level to do such things.

Those numerous editing tools are also used for sources called "secondary" or "peripheral." Those consist of cut scenes, promotional material, and alternative versions made from the media source, this last one being possibly a movie, a TV show, a video game, or an anime. Thanks to the development of DVD and Blu-Ray, all those materials peripheral to the media source significantly improve the vidder's options.

Another type of clip also exists and is often used for alternate universe fan videos, those that are "truly" external to the media source. In that case, it is possible to talk of cut scenes from the fandom and not from the original media source. It is explained by the place that those clips occupy in the vidder's imagination, since it is about including clips in a foreign universe, and make them credible for the viewer, which can be quite the challenge.

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[7] Vincent Amiel, *Esthétique du montage*, 2005, 112-113.

The most usual cases for such things are shots from the actors in other parts, as to vary the options of representations in the fan video. That possibility, and also the one that concerns finding external landscape shots to match the ones of the alternate universe, are not only used for this specific category of fan creation, but that practice tends to be extremely important for alternate universe fan videos.

Regarding those shots, it is important to note that the poaching of emblematic landscape, faction symbol, or character as some kind of stock shot for the fandom of the fan video is a very practical habit for alternate universe ones. This is all the more crucial when the presented story is quite different from the media source one, and that it is necessary to keep the aesthetics of the original universe, to have at least a visual continuity with canon.

It is also possible to add "new" actors to the cast from the media source. It is a classical practice in alternate universe fan videos, given their narratives that do not conform to the original ones.

One of the two possible cases is to pick an actor to portray an existing character from the referential universe, either at a different age, like a different actress for an older Padme Amidala in *Star Wars*, or for a character that is not present in video productions (film, TV, web) from the fandom, but in books or comics. One example would be Mara Jade, famous character from the *Star Wars* expanded universe, who has only been included in publications or video games.

A detail to mention about this kind of creative practice is the use of extra actors when a referential universe is live action, but has characters that showed up only in anime expanded productions. It requires then to have a "live" actor so as not to shock visually. It is indeed the norm in fan videos (alternate universe or not) to not mix live action and animated sources.

The second case when an external actor is added for an alternate universe fan video is when the presented narrative includes original characters (commonly called OC). Those characters can emerge from any settings that they were created in a fan fiction or a role playing story the fan video could be based upon, or be made up directly for an alternate universe fan video. In the latter case, the alternate universe fan video is self-sufficient, as it is not part of a larger and fannish multi support alternate universe narrative.[8]

Following such artistic choices, it is usual to crop the external clip so as to get rid of all the elements that would make the clip look too out of place with the referential universe. It is all the more crucial when said universe has a specific aesthetics, like period pieces or science fiction.

In order to combine clips in the most efficient fashion, another technique is used on a regular basis: color effects. It is indeed common to see black and white, sepia, or even other color tones used in alternate universe fan videos. It grants a greater homogeneity to the chosen clips, all the more if plenty of external clips are used, as explained above. It can also visually minimize cropping when different formats are combined.[9]

In the same logic, overlays and masks are often used to mix clips from different sources, all the more when the vidder uses software that is powerful enough to offer precise and versatile tools and settings. Those processes are chosen to put into the picture in the smoothest and most credible way possible the relationships and events described in the alternate universe narrative, especially to make believe that those characters "really" shared a moment on screen, even when it never even remotely was the case in the media source.

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[8] It happens that an alternate universe is declined through diverse forms and supports : fan fiction, role playing, graphics (fan art), and fan video. Those combinations vary, as well as the number of their creators. Some authors also make fan arts or fan videos, but there can be collaboration between different persons beyond the original shape of the alternate universe in question.

[9] When the media sources are of different formats, it is usual to pick either 16:9 or 2.35:1 for the fan video. It is indeed easier to "letter box" than to zoom too much, which can damage the picture and the overall quality of the video. Indeed, many vidders are attentive to the use of high quality source images (DVD, HD TV, Blu-Ray).

A final technique that is sometimes used is to give to the alternate universe video a style close to the referential universe. That choice is rarer than those mentioned above, and consists in adding opening or ending credits – most of the time very short ones – in the same style as the one from the media source. It is only doable if the original source has not only a very defined and particular look and feel, and that it is possible to "redo" it for vidders who do not have the artistic and technical crew that creative industries have available.

If the technical tools allow one to bring to "visual" life the vidder's artistic intentions, it still remains that those tools and technical aspectsare the link between the vidder's creativity and the reactions that those alternate universe fan videos provoke in their viewers.

3. Reception Stakes: Alternate Universe Fan Video Viewers

Since the early years of fan studies, fans have slowly gained a better reputation from other parts of society. It is partly due to some fans' discussions and creativity. Some theorists, including Jennifer Hayward in her book *Consuming Pleasures*[10], devoted to the soap opera, have written about this topic. It seems worthy to mention this mentality evolution when we are to consider alternate universe fan video viewers, since those emerge from different parts of the audience of the referential universe.

It is rare that a fan video "consumer" watches one that falls within the alternate universe category if they do not like the media source to start with. Rare cases exist, but the viewers are often friends of the vidder's or generally like said vidder's creation, or might also be judges on a fan video award site, as many of those exist online. Generally speaking, fan video viewers watch creations from fandom they appreciate, and sometimes only certain aspects of said fandom, which does not make everyone susceptible to watch anything in an alternate universe.

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[10]Paragraph *Audiences in Power* in the third chapter "The future of serial narrative" (Hayward, 1997, 163-173).

Most of the time, it is necessary to have at least a basic knowledge of a fandom to truly appreciate its content, even though there are exceptions. Some fan videos indeed function as trailers or are episodic based on TV show pilots for example. On the other side, it is often mandatory to have a more advanced knowledge of a fandom when it comes to alternate universe, especially if it is based on a particular fan fiction or role-play settings.

One of the common practices, in terms of peripheral text to the alternate universe fan video, is to have it accompanied by additional notes from the vidder, posted along the video. They often explain the story, the new characters – possibly with the extra cast listing – and sometimes contain links to the fan fiction or role play forum where the alternate universe started, if needed. The goal of this per text is to render easier the viewer's understanding, who will be able to get used to the visual universe of the alternate universe fan video they are watching, especially if more than one is made for the same alternate narrative.

When studying reception trends for alternate universe fan videos, it shows that the three reading and interpretation degrees evoked in her chapter "Visual Meaning" by Camille Bacon Smith may apply.[11] Readings may be in relation to similar images, here within the fandom frame, or the reference universe of the alternate settings. Other readings and interpretation have a signification that goes beyond the scene shown: here it would be the relation to the narrative arc that does not conform to "canon."

Another important part of audience behavior when it comes to alternate universe fan video is the "willing suspension of disbelief." This notion, originally developed by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1817 is the key that allows the viewer to really get "into" the alternate

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[11] **Pattern Recognition and Meaning Pleasure**
In general, the viewer may read the visual images of television or movies as:
1. Intrinsically meaningful (interpretation at the level of the flow) – codes in general use in the cultural representation of similar images;
2. Patterned and then meaningful (interpretation at the level of the macro flow) – codes specifically constructed for reading the particular series; or
3. Simultaneously patterned and meaningful (interpretation at the level of micro flow) – codes the meaning of which resonate beyond the context of the scene in which they appear (Camille Bacon Smith, *Enterprising Women*, 1992, 181-182.)

universe context.[12] It functions on various levels, including if the narrative presented goes against "canon" or other alternate universe preferences from the viewer, even when this person watches said fan video, either by curiosity or as a judge on a fan video award site.

Finally, it is interesting to note that alternate universe fan videos are often related to particular niches within the general fan community. This category of fan videos is often less viewed, even if some vidders' notoriety may have an impact. Their watching also depends on the relationship an alternate universe fan video that is based on a fan fiction or a role play may keep with the "original" communities.

The vidder has often worked in close collaboration with the fan fiction author or the role players, to stay as close as possible to the foundational writing for their alternate universe fan video project, which is all the more important if a series of fan videos is made, instead of a single one. Those alternate universe niches, while not commercial because of not only their "amateur" and "fan" quality but mostly because of their divergences with the preexisting universe, are imbricated within a mosaic of creativity and interpretation that position them aside from the main fandom, even when both vidders and viewers may appreciate the fandom canon.

Conclusion

Alternate universe fan videos operate as a reinterpretation of one or more media sources, and one or more fandom. Most of the time it is focuses on a single preexisting universe but crossovers do happen nonetheless.

The visual and audio choices are crucial for the creation of a fan video, especially in the case of an alternate universe one, since the codes from the media source and the original fandom of this alternate universe are reworked. The most detailed work is the visual one on

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[12] "In this idea originated the plan of the 'Lyrical Ballads'; in which it was agreed, that my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic, yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith." (Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *BiographiaLiteraria*, 1817.)

most occasions, with the adjustments made possible by the digital tools, even though dialogs – and sometimes text – may bring additional narrative elements.

It is important to note that some alternate universe narratives may require a solid knowledge of the presented story, if the events and characters are too far away from the reference "canon." The use of mostly English-language music – as this is the most common language in online fan communities – or instrumental tracks may function as a good way of making the fan video more easily understandable.

Finally, relationships between alternate universe fan video creators and viewers show practices different from the fandom's original reading grids, which adds flexibility in terms of acceptance of narrative content that isn't conform to canon – either the fandom's or the media source's. That notion of different audience subgroups asks the question of the existence and scale of the niche phenomenon within fandom.

This notion of niche within the global fandom community brings one back to questions from both academics and creative industries, regarding how it might make fans niche markets. This topic is developed by the British academic Matt Hills in his chapter "Fan Cultures between Consumerism and 'Resistance.'"[13] It is interesting to see that considering the niche at the level of the different layers of fandom is more fruitful, since it gives more options to the fan for what they want to explore in their creations, than if fan consumption and creation were dictated by a marketing restricted narrative. Of course this last phenomenon exists as well for fandoms whose media source is the object of a powerful marketing strategy that pushes forward for the production's canon. The alternate universe category defines niches not only within the global community but also within the subgroups that can be defined by their creative practice: fan fiction, fan video, fan art, and role-playing.

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[13] "I have argued that niche marketing, while seeming to reflect authentic values of fan culture back to the fan, and thus to align production and consumption values – nevertheless does so at a cost. The fan-consumer niche market becomes almost entirely insulated from any wider market. It is therefore cut off from the 'mass' cultural circulation which generated the existence of such a fandom in the first place." (Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures*, 2002, 44-45.)

It is eventually possible to relate the notion of alternate universe fan video with the third form of simulacra defined by the theorist Jean Baudrillard in his chapter "Simulacres et Science-Fiction."[14] First of all the "canon" fan video, that precisely and fully follows the reference universe could be considered the second form of simulacra, since it shows certain parts of a story, images, and significations already presented by the first kind of simulacra. This one would be the media source, a product from the creative industries. By poaching and rewriting the narrative from the preexisting universe and external media sources, alternate universe fan videos reach a new level of simulation from reality. This type of fan creation is close to the notion of hyper reality developed by Baudrillard for the third form of simulacra, especially thanks to the digital tools used to create them.

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[14] "**Three Orders of Simulacra:**
Natural Simulacra, naturalists, based on image, imitation and counterfeit, harmonious, optimistic, and meaning to restitute or ideally institute a nature made to God's image,
Productive Simulacra, productivist, based on energy, strength, its materialization by machine and in all the production system – Prometheus like vision of a globalization and a continuous expansion, in its liberalization of indefinite energy (desire is part of the utopia related to this order of simulacra),
Simulacra of simulation, based on information, model, cybernetic game – total functionality, hyper reality, goal of total control." (Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et Simulation*, 1981, 177.)

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