

## *Women, Star Trek, and the early development of fannish vidding*

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[0.1] Abstract—This paper argues that the practices and aesthetics of vidding were structured by the relationship of *Star Trek's* female fans to that particular televisual text. *Star Trek* fandom was the crucible within which vidding developed because *Star Trek's* narrative impelled female fans to take on two positions often framed as contradictory in mainstream culture: the desiring body, and the controlling voice of technology. To make a vid, to edit footage to subtext-revealing music, is to unite these positions: to put technology at the service of desire. Although the conflict between desire and control was particularly thematized in *Star Trek*, most famously through the divided character of Spock, the practices of vidding are now applied to other visual texts. This essay examines the early history of vidding and demonstrates, through the close reading of particular vids made for *Star Trek* and *Quantum Leap*, how vidding heals the wounds created by the displacement and fragmentation of women on television.

[0.2] Keywords—Fan vid; Gender; *Quantum Leap*; *Star Trek*

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### 1. Introduction: What is a vid?

[1.1] Vidding is a form of grassroots filmmaking in which clips from television shows and movies are set to music. The result is called a *vid* or a *songvid*. Unlike professional MTV-style music videos, in which footage is created to promote and popularize a piece of music, fannish vidders use music in order to comment on or analyze a set of preexisting visuals, to stage a reading, or occasionally to use the footage to tell new stories. In vidding, the fans are fans of the visual source, and music is used as an interpretive lens to help the viewer to see the source text differently. A vid is a visual essay that stages an argument, and thus it is more akin to arts criticism than to traditional music video. As Margie, a vidder, explained: "The thing I've never been able to explain to anyone not in [media] fandom (or to fans with absolutely no exposure to vids) is that where pro music videos are visuals that illustrate the music, songvids are music that tells the story of the visuals. They don't get that it's actually a completely different emphasis" (personal communication, October 24, 2006).

[1.2] Jake Coyle ([note 1](#)) makes this mistake in a recent news article, "The Best Fan-Made Music Videos on YouTube," in which he surveys the many "startling, worthy videos" made by fans, the best of which "make use of film in public domain or lifted from copyrighted material." Coyle's article, which was distributed by the Associated Press and widely linked across the Internet, begins, "Since the dawn of YouTube, fans have been melding their own amateur video with the music of their favorite bands." Coyle's underlying—and unquestioned—assumption is that the fans who make "fan-made music video" are fans of the audio source, that these fans edit footage to music because they like the bands. In this kind

of music video, the visuals serve the music; Coyle describes these videos as music "revisualized online."

[1.3] But the assumption that music videos are intended to illustrate music leads Coyle to misunderstand the only songvid he discusses, and perhaps not coincidentally, the only "startling, worthy" video on his list made by women: T. Jonesy and Killa's "Closer" (<http://www.imeem.com/francescacoppa/video/COjLJwKz>; 2003). Coyle describes "Closer" as "footage from 'Star Trek,' scratched and colored to roughly match the style of the original video"—that is, director Mark Romanek's notorious music video for Nine Inch Nails. Coyle grapples with "Closer," which he finds "weirder" than the other music videos he discusses, possibly because its footage is so evidently *not* engaged in the project of "revisualizing" its music. Coyle then suggests that T. Jonesy and Killa are using *Star Trek* to reimagine Mark Romanek's original video for the song, except that "Closer" doesn't have much to say about Romanek's footage. What "Closer" does have to say, it says about the character of Mr. Spock; in other words, both the Nine Inch Nails song and Romanek's video are used to provide new meaning to the source footage. Coyle ultimately admits this, noting that, "The song (which includes explicit lyrics) makes Spock look terrifying," but he doesn't seem to realize that this marks a shift from music criticism to media criticism.

[1.4] Vids like "Closer" come from a tradition of vid making significantly older than "the dawn of YouTube." In 2005, the year that YouTube was founded, media fans celebrated the 30th anniversary of vidding at Vividcon, an ongoing convention dedicated to vids. For those fans, the art of vidding begins with *Star Trek* and Spock. The Vividcon community traces its lineage back to Kandy Fong's *Star Trek* slide show, "What Do You Do With a Drunken Vulcan?" (1975). At the same time, much has

changed between that first slide show and today's vids. Vidding has expanded far beyond *Star Trek*: thousands of vids have been made analyzing popular source texts, and most television shows and movies have had at least one vid made about them. Vidding has also advanced technologically: vidders have worked with slide projectors, VCRs, and computers; they have used film stills, VHS tape, and DVD source footage; they have shown their work at conventions and distributed it through the mail and over the Internet in both downloadable and streaming forms. A computer-generated, rapidly cut, effects-laden vid made in 2008 and distributed on YouTube or Imeem might seem a far cry from the slide shows and early VCR vids that vidders claim as antecedents, but these works share an aesthetic tradition and an analytical impulse not immediately obvious to the outsider.

[1.5] It is therefore important, in this time of rapidly growing interest in DIY video, to document the history of this decades-old artistic tradition, especially as most popular media commentators fail to realize that most of the video hosted on YouTube wasn't made *for* YouTube. YouTube isn't a creative force; it's a distribution mechanism, and although it and other media platforms are enabling many subcultural art forms to be visible for the first time, the coherence of vidding as a tradition might be lost in a sea of user-generated content. There is also a danger that vidding's pre-YouTube culture—invisible, underground, female-dominated—might be ignored or written out of media history, much as the history of the novel was written to exclude the lady novelists Nathaniel Hawthorne so notoriously referred to as a "damned mob of scribbling women." In this essay, I begin to write a history of *vidding* women, not only to demonstrate broad continuities in vidding practice over the course of changing technologies, but also specifically to connect these practices and aesthetics back to their evolution out of *Star Trek*.

## 2. The problem of *Star Trek*: From Number One to first lady

[2.1] To trace the history of fannish vidding is to trace the emergence of a distinctively female visual aesthetic and critical approach. It is worth noting that 1975, the year that Kandy Fong made her first *Star Trek* slide shows, was also the year of Laura Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in *Screen* (1975). Second-wave feminism had popularized ideas of female independence and sexual subjectivity, priming woman to take control of the camera, and many vids reverse, or at least complicate, traditional scopophilia of the kind Mulvey describes, casting men as objects of visual desire and addressing sexist problems in visual texts.

[2.2] Vidders locate the origin of this distinctive female filmmaking practice within *Star Trek* fandom. But why *Star Trek*? Thirty-five years after the first *Star Trek* conventions, 25 years after the first ethnographies of *Star*

*Trek* fan culture, it has become commonplace to locate a whole range of artistic practices in *Star Trek* without theorizing why it should be so. But making art is not just something Trekkies do, though science fiction and media fans are often discussed as if they were a race or a biological type. Rather, I would argue that vidding developed in response to *Star Trek* (and the figure of Spock in particular) for some very specific reasons.

[2.3] First, and most simply, the women who were fans of science fiction in general and *Star Trek* in particular had among them a high proportion of scientists, computer programmers, and mathematicians. As Melissa Dickinson (2006) notes, many *Star Trek* BNFs (big name fans) had advanced degrees in science and engineering: Jacqueline Lichtenberg (*Star Trek Lives!*) was a chemist; Judy Segal (head of the Star Trek Welcomittee) has a master's degree in botany; Joan Marie Verba (*Boldly Writing: A Trekker Fan and Zine History, 1967–1987*) has a bachelor's degree in physics, went to graduate school for astronomy, and worked as a computer programmer before becoming an editor and writer. Similarly, Mary Van Deusen, a vidder who was responsible for teaching scores of others to vid, has an undergraduate degree in physics, graduate degrees in mathematics and computer science, and a long career working for the research division of IBM. Other early vidders had similar scientific expertise, interests, or careers. These women were not afraid of technology: they knew how to program a VCR.

[2.4] But second—and this answer is related to the first—*Star Trek* contains within it a problem that many vids have attempted, literally or metaphorically, to solve: at the center of the text is a displaced woman. The original, failed *Star Trek* pilot "The Cage" (1964), written by Gene Roddenberry and featuring Jeffrey Hunter as Captain Christopher Pike, also introduced the captain's aloof, unemotional, and tactically brilliant second in command. This was not the famously logical Spock; rather, her name—fitting for such a mechanical woman—was "Number One." Although Spock was in the pilot, he was not the cool, highly rational Spock we know now. In fact, *Star Trek's* insistence on the *Enterprise's* first officer as an unemotional mind makes particular sense if the character is a woman: it is a 1960s picture of an unnatural—for which read: strong, highly rational, technologically minded—woman.

[2.5] As first officer, Number One fulfills the same role for Pike as Spock later does for Kirk. Not only is she the officer the captain relies on most, but she's also marked by her difference; in fact, as with Spock, there's a suggestion that her worth is part and parcel of her difference. In an early scene, Pike dismisses a female yeoman and then mutters to Number One, "I just can't get used to having a woman on the bridge." When Number One does an understandable double take, Pike quickly backpedals. "No offense, Lieutenant," he says. "You're different, of course" (figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Number One's double take in *Star Trek's* original pilot, "The Cage" (1964).

[2.6] As Majel Barrett plays it, Number's One's reaction to this declaration of difference is yet another double take, followed by a controlled flash of anger and then hurt; she is visibly not pleased that Captain Pike doesn't see her as a woman.



[The Cage \(excerpt\) - 1964](#)

**Clip 1.** Clip from *Star Trek's* original pilot, "The Cage" (1964), showing Number One's reaction to a remark of Captain Pike's.

[2.7] This theme is expounded upon throughout the rest of the episode, during which aliens kidnap Pike to press him into fathering a new human race. In service of this goal, the aliens offer him a variety of potential mates, including Number One, Yeoman Colt, and Vina, the sole survivor of a crashed scientific expedition. Vina is desperate to seduce Pike into being Adam to her Eve and furious at the arrival of female competition. Sizing up the statuesque (and sensibly dressed) Number One, Vina snorts, "They'd have more luck crossing him with a *computer*." Despite this insult to her womanhood and her humanity, Number One keeps her composure: "Well, shall we do a little time computation? There was a Vina

listed on that expedition as an *adult* crewman. Now, adding 18 years to your age *then*—"



[The Cage \(excerpt\) - 1964](#)

**Clip 2.** Clip from *Star Trek's* original pilot, "The Cage" (1964), with Number One being compared to a computer.

[2.8] Although the overly scientific syntax of "time computation" foreshadows Spock's irritating levels of precision, the fact that this is mathematics in the service of cattiness shows Roddenberry struggling to imagine that unimaginable creature of science fiction: a highly rational woman in a position of power. Forget Spock: Number One is *Star Trek's* truly divided soul, the show's real half-human, half-alien being.

[2.9] "The Cage" reveals Roddenberry's interest in women as both sexual subjects and objects. When *Star Trek* fans talk about "The Cage," it's often to note how surprisingly emotional Spock is; when Number One and Yeoman Colt are kidnapped, it is Spock who cries out, overcome with emotion, "The women!" But although this is probably the episode's most famous clip, it's easy to ignore how genuinely "The Cage" is about the women. At the episode's climax, when all the characters are brought together in the eponymous cage, the frame literally teems with women—more than we ever see again (figure 2).

