

Journal of Fandom Studies  
Volume 10 Number 1

© 2022 Intellect Ltd Article. English language. [https://doi.org/10.1386/jfs\\_00048\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/jfs_00048_1)

Received 1 December 2020; Accepted 21 March 2022

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# Vaporwar and military contents fandom

## ABSTRACT

*This article investigates vaporwar – a kind of military fanvid where military footage is remixed, set to music and given a ‘vaporwave’ makeover through filters and editing. While a niche group, it is a growing one and loved by its fans. Why? Drawing on Turk and Johnson’s idea of looking at vidding as an ecology, this article suggests that these videos should be seen as part of a ‘contents fandom’ of the military. This term is adapted from ‘contents tourism’, where people travel to a location due to its association with different media depictions of the same subject, and here means that the fans who make and view these videos do so out of a fannish interest in all things military. These videos are thus part of a turn towards ‘participatory militainment’, media made by military fans for military fans, drawing on the internet vernacular of vaporwave to prove the genre’s coolness and validity. At the same time, they point to a sense of nostalgia and dissatisfaction in this fandom with current military trends, and an aestheticization of the military as a reason for its existence. What does it mean for the military to have fans?*

## KEYWORDS

remix  
fanvid  
military fandom  
YouTube  
vaporwave  
militainment  
participatory culture

Until the creator deleted it in January 2020, a decision he reversed in April 2021, War Aesthetics was the most popular of a small cluster of YouTube channels in which military footage is given a ‘vaporwave’ makeover through mixing clips together, altering their appearance with filters and colour-correction and soundtracking them with (usually, although not exclusively) electronic music. The result is a sort of military tribute video, showcasing the coolness of the showcased military. At its height, War Aesthetics had over 75,000 subscribers – not quite the level of some popular YouTubers, but enough to demonstrate

significant interest. What is more, the interest is not only in viewing such videos, but in creating them. Smaller creators with similar content have subscriber numbers ranging from a few hundred to a few thousand, posting new videos on a regular basis. While this is a niche interest, particularly by the standards of YouTube, it is still a significant one. It is not just that there was one creator of this material, but that there is a small community that finds this a valuable and valued shared hobby.

Interest in military subjects is nothing new in popular culture, but these channels point to something different – a participatory culture of military media. While traditional ‘militainment’ (Stahl 2010) is made by large media enterprises, usually in collaboration with an official military, this smaller-scale version is made by individuals, out of archival material they find online. It points to a more grassroots version of military media, demonstrative of what I am terming a ‘contents fandom’ of the military: a broad but involved interest in military subjects for their own sake. These videos show the military itself as an object of appreciation, something cool and interesting, not only worth watching but worth creating something about.

What these particular military fanvids highlight is also significant. These are not just videos of militaries, but they are videos of militaries done in a specific remix style – that of vaporwave. An internet music and design genre based around samples of commercials, easy listening music and other such ‘throwaway’ material from the recent past, vaporwave has come to serve as an internet-culture signifier for nostalgia (Born and Haworth 2017; Glitsos 2018), one that has been repurposed across the political spectrum from a ‘critique of capitalism’ to a favourite art style of the alt-right (Teixeira Pinto 2019; Tuters 2021). That participatory militainment is taking this form demonstrates some of the tensions in contemporary military media between a glorification of the military for its own sake, with its focus on cool images and technology, its appeal to a younger generation and a sense that its best moments are in the past. Looking at how these videos draw on vaporwave provides insight into how ‘military fandom’ is expressed among a new generation.

This article brings together military media, nostalgia and fandom. I use the concept of the ‘ecology of vidding’ (Turk and Johnson 2012), a way of looking at fanvids that emphasizes the community relationship around creators and viewers, to understand why these videos, which its creators/viewers refer to as ‘warwave’, ‘vaporwar’ or simply ‘aesthetics’, have such appeal. It is ethnographically based, although largely a theoretical exploration of the practice. Through analysis of comments on videos, the videos themselves and their environment on YouTube, I explore the ecology of these videos, and from this exploration, illustrate how ‘military fandom’ functions in a participatory media environment and what it suggests about how military subjects are understood. This article therefore contributes to the literature surrounding military entertainment and the domestication of warfare as well as that of contemporary fanworks and practices.

## FANVIDS AS CULTURAL FORM AND FORUM

Vaporwar, warwave, (war)aesthetics – all names for a style of amateur/fan-made videos with military subjects. The videos are made around a particular military subject, usually a specific country’s military, a specific conflict or a kind of equipment. They have a set style, where clips of military footage are cut up and edited to the beat of a song. The song is usually – although

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not exclusively – from the synthwave or vaporwave genre, styles of electronic music that looks back to the 1980s and 1990s for inspiration. In addition to the editing of clips together, the footage is treated with filters in order to make it seem more ‘glitchy’, altering colours, adding in VHS-style lines and date graphics, and other elements associated with vaporwave aesthetics, as will be explained. Video subjects vary but are usually focused around the Cold War era or the break-up of Yugoslavia, with a few forays into more recent conflicts in Chechnya, Ukraine and the Middle East.<sup>1</sup>

While creators have their own particular skills and trademarks in certain areas, the overall effect is very similar across each of the channels. Yet this does not stop creators from continuously making new videos, or fans of the genre from viewing them, subscribing to channels to get updates and making playlists for longer stretches of viewing time. Viewers are excited to see new content, making sure to comment when a favourite creator releases a new video, but also like to go back and watch old favourites. Variations in style and subject matter provide variety within this accepted framework. In some cases, seeing it done inspires viewers to become creators, presenting their own take on the genre, which is usually met with support from others. The existence of a supportive community encourages creators to keep producing videos. The result is a genre of minor variations, but a strongly recognizable style that attracts a certain kind of military fan.

It is difficult to determine exactly when and where this genre appeared, but it rose to visibility on YouTube in the late 2010s. While most creators cluster around each other and can be found through linking and searching key words, it is not entirely possible to determine how many people are involved – at least eleven channels as of March 2020, with more since then. This makes it small in comparison to large YouTube genres like beauty vlogging or toy unboxing, but also makes it possible for new creators (and viewers) to keep track of it. Creators and viewers mingle together, commenting on each other’s videos, joining each other’s Discord servers and generally behaving as a coherent ‘scene’ (Straw 2001), with friendships and rivalries, collaborations and insults, and a general sense of connection in what they are doing. They are a community based around the creation of military fanvids.

The term ‘fanvid’ comes out of media fandom, where it is defined as ‘a form of grassroots filmmaking in which clips from television shows and movies are set to music’ (Coppa 2008: 1.1). Fanvids have been popular in fandom circles since the 1970s, when they were made with slide projectors and screened at conventions, gaining in visibility through the VHS era and accelerating in the 1990s and 2000s as editing software and video distribution became more accessible to non-professional video-makers. In the internet era of fandom, fanvids are an established form of fanwork and can be found across video distribution and social media platforms, giving them a visibility far beyond their early years (Stein 2014) and bringing them into contact with fans outside of the fanfiction and shipping circles. Coppa makes the argument that fanvids are an entirely separate form from MTV-style music videos, which use similar aesthetics of quick edits and moving images set to music, as fanvids ‘use music in order to comment on or analyse a set of pre-existing visuals, to stage a reading, or occasionally to use the footage to tell new stories’ (2008: 1.1). They are therefore both communicative, used to make a statement about a source text and fannish, in that they are made out of enthusiasm, or at least appreciation for, existing audio-visual texts. The music enhances the visuals, rather

1. Examples of such videos can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i2HtOoiSajs> and <https://youtu.be/aezm-VxfBQA>. Accessed 5 October 2022.

than the other way around. They are not music videos in the traditional sense, they are videos with music.

What is more, they are an early example of a turn in media culture towards ‘participation’ – that is, for viewers of media to participate in it by making their own media in response (Jenkins 2006). This idea has become mainstream in the past two decades, the cornerstone of an internet culture based on ‘platforms’ that distribute user-created material across the world (van Dijck et al. 2018). Reacting to media culture by making media in response is a fan practice that has been mainstreamed. While actively making something like a fanvid, which does take time and effort, might still be a relatively niche thing to actually do, there is at least knowledge that this kind of work is out there to find. It is an accepted and known way of interacting with media, and one that can be expected for a wide range of media texts, even those that fall outside of traditional fandom circles.

That does not mean they are necessarily completely understandable to outsiders. As with other fanworks, vids are produced by a specific community and usually engage with issues that are specific to that community. Coppa argues that vids are a form of ‘collaborative critical thinking’ (2008: 5.1), suggesting that ultimate authorship belongs to the fan community. Turk and Johnson (2012) argue that we need to understand the community around fanvids as an ecology – to ‘look at the roles fannish audiences play in shaping th[e] practice: the social and rhetorical contexts for both the production and reception of vids, the constraints and possibilities generated by fannish conventions of interpretation’ (Turk and Johnson 2012: 1.4). Fanvids in this model are part of an interconnected system of readers and writers, in which knowledge about both the source text and community interpretive conventions is used in the creation of vids as well as their reception. Fanvid-makers are both individual authors, with their own style and particular interests, and part of a social system of viewers that gives context to their creations. Creators are also audiences for other’s creations, and it is together that the interpretive conventions of the genre are continually developed. It is ‘the collaborative work of sharing interpretations that precedes and enables the composing of a particular text’ (Turk and Johnson 2012: 2.6). In order to understand a fanvid, we must understand the ecology that produced it.

This means understanding the specific fandom context and how that influences the form and content of these videos is necessary in order to understand the commentary that they are making on the source text. For vaporwar, that means looking at these videos as, indeed, part of a fandom – a fandom of the military, as I will explain – as well as part of internet culture. The interconnectedness of these videos and their creators means that understanding them is not necessarily in focusing on the videos themselves, but in discussing the community they come out of. That is what I will now do.

## METHODOLOGY

The vaporwar community is not the easiest to research, compared to a more clearly delineated and named fandom, and doing so raises interesting questions about contemporary borders between public and private, community and general space online. As Dym and Fiesler (2020) discuss, researching the ‘grey areas’ of fandom is an ethically complex process, even by the standards of internet research. Fans are particularly concerned about improper amplification and the privacy of their fannish identities. Public and private are fluid

terms here, and ones I have had to consider at every step of the research. Everything here, while made for an audience, was not necessarily made for every audience. At the same time, creators do seek recognition for their work and wish to grow their channels on the public-facing medium of YouTube. They celebrate subscriber milestones and want others to see and acknowledge their videos. This is not a closed forum of individual fans around a controversial subject – this is public-facing creative work on a platform that encourages growth. The creators have chosen to use it instead of alternative platforms that offer less scrutiny. Striking a balance between recognition and privacy is something I have thought about throughout this research and informs the methodological choices I made.

I first discovered the YouTube channel War Aesthetics in the fall of 2018, from a friend who knew I was looking for interesting archival remixes for my work on the Curation and Appropriation of Digital European Audio-visual Heritage (CADEAH) project. I checked in on the channel on and off until finally committing to it as a research topic in September 2019, when I began to catalogue the community in earnest. This proved to be a fortuitous time to do so, as it was a time of both growth and upheaval. Some creators started their channels, others were deleted, both by choice and by YouTube.<sup>2</sup> This article is therefore a glimpse at a community in transition, through both expansion and contraction.

This analysis is ethnographically inspired, with a goal of exploring the ecology of these videos in order to understand them. I will not go so far as to call this an ethnography, as it is based mostly on collected traces of a community rather than deep immersion into it, but it shares similar aims, as described by Hine (2015). The point is to try and understand what this community is, and from there, to understand its works and what this tells us about their subject, to follow Turk and Johnson's ecologies model.

YouTube was my entry point, and it remained my main access point to the genre and the community around it. My first goal was to get some sense of the scope of the community, how it connects to both itself and the broader YouTube system, which I did through searching with YouTube itself. I created a separate account for this research and proceeded to spend time exploring YouTube with it, branching off from War Aesthetics, investigating what other channels were linked to, who they linked to and what the YouTube algorithm recommended me as it got to learn the searching and viewing habits of this account. I wanted not only to figure out who was making this content, but to explore how YouTube would respond to someone with an interest in it – how would it adapt to this interest? What kinds of videos would it suggest to me alongside the ones I was watching? Knowing that much of the experience of YouTube comes out of spending time on YouTube, it was the centre of my research.

From my searches on YouTube, I determined eleven accounts making vaporwar content in late 2019 and early 2020. On these channels, I watched all videos posted until March 2020 and read their comments sections, which amounted to 621 videos in total over the eleven channels, getting a sense of how people communicated with each other and connected with the overall scene. This gave me a sense of the main output and how videos, and creators, compared to each other. I downloaded the comments and commenter names from these channels using the Digital Methods Initiative's YouTube Data Tools, specifically the Video Info and Comments tool. With these data, I compared usernames across all channels, in order to get a sense of who was posting and

2. Vaporwar channels are occasionally removed by YouTube for both content (usually violence) and copyright violations. Due to the 'black box' nature of YouTube, it is difficult for viewers to determine what violation caused the removal. Creators have, however, generally learned what YouTube accepts and does not, and full channel removals are now rare.

where. There were over 15,000 unique usernames represented in the data set, although the majority of those only posted one or two comments.

From there, I focused on deeper analysis of the comment sections of selected channels, beginning with what was the most popular, War Aesthetics, which was created in late 2017 and deleted in early 2020 (although, as mentioned, was reinstated in April 2021, as I was revising this article). To this, I added the comments from JOC, another content creator that War Aesthetics recommended before he deleted his channel, alt-protestant, a smaller content creator whose channel was frequently removed from YouTube due to content or copyright violations, and War Aesthetics Archive, which was created by fans of War Aesthetics after that account was deleted, 390 videos in total. These channels provide a good sample of the overall community and its concerns, while keeping the number of comments to a level that I could make sense of. I coded the entirety of their comment sections as of March 2020 in Atlas.ti with a grounded theory approach, using the notes I had made in my first run-through of the videos as a guideline for initial free coding of the comments, which I then developed into a more thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) focused around reaction to the content of the videos, the form of the videos and connections made to other forms of military entertainment. This gave me a more detailed overview of how (some) viewers were reacting to the videos. Not every viewer, even an involved one, wants to comment on what they are watching, which means that this research is limited to visible reactions. However, I feel that they reflect the community enough to get a sense of what is going on with the videos and their audience. Interviews with video creators were considered, but rejected as a methodology as creators, while expressing some initial interest, did not want to participate in the entire formal process of an academic interview.

This methodological approach means that demographic information is difficult to come by and not 100 per cent trustworthy. The general sense is that this is a worldwide community, mostly male and relatively young, based on how the commenters talk about their locations, ages and the use of non-English languages. However, it is impossible to determine this definitively.

Supplementing this was observations of Discord servers connected to JOC and War Aesthetics, both of which are no longer running. Discord, a communications software popular with gamers and other subcultures, lies somewhere between a forum and a private chatroom. Creators often had a Discord server connected to their channel, which they advertised with their videos and encouraged viewers to participate in, but the servers often functioned as more of a private get-together for sharing jokes, memes and observations on life and common interests. As they were publicly advertised and encouraged for viewers to join, with many other 'lurkers' and no barriers to entry, I felt it was permissible to observe them and take notes on what I saw, but due to the way they were treated as private, community space, compared to the more outward-facing YouTube, I will not be directly quoting or referring to them. They helped to contextualize the YouTube data and to help me gain a sense of how participants in the scene talk among themselves in a more conversational way, but they are not the main focus of my analysis.

The use of Discord does demonstrate some of the complications raised around ideas of public and private in researching a community like this. It is a small group of amateurs making controversial but interesting videos, with much of the audience being fellow video-makers, and yet, it is also public art, posted in a public forum, guided by YouTube's encouragement to grow



their channels and audiences. This, as mentioned, raises questions about how to conduct this research ethically. I have opted to follow some of Dym and Fiesler's guidelines towards best practices for fandom research, namely by being sparing with direct quotes, using the Discord material only as background and in general treating the data gathered as an aggregate, rather than following individuals. When it has been necessary to centre a channel, I opted to focus on War Aesthetics, which had a high enough subscriber count to feel like more of a public figure (and, for most of the analysis of this article, had a deleted account that added another layer of privacy). This is not a clear or neat distinction. In this situation, it is impossible to be. I have done my best to be transparent while still reflecting on what I have found.

## VAPORWAR AND MILITARY CONTENTS FANDOM

What is most visible in the YouTube comments is praise. Commenters are, for the most part, complimentary and enthusiastic about the content of vaporwar videos and are eager to praise the creators for both individual videos and the overall content of the channel. This is not surprising – after all, people who do not have strong feelings are not likely to bother commenting – but it is worth noting how much people seem to genuinely appreciate these channels' content. They are not confused by what they see or critical of glorifying war and combat. This can also be seen by the creation of a War Aesthetics archive account, with over 10,000 subscribers of its own, run by someone who had downloaded the videos prior to the channel's deletion. That people had downloaded the videos and missed them enough to want them back on YouTube shows that the attachment is genuine.

This is also striking considering the range of the videos. While some video-makers have particular focuses that they turn to more often than others, and the scene generally focuses on Cold War militaries, there is considerable variety in terms of featured militaries. The channels do not generally take a national or ideological focus, with Soviet or Warsaw Pact videos alongside videos about the United States, Scandinavia or Japan. This interest in variety holds true for the commenters as well. While some subjects are more popular than others, and some commenters are pleased to see particular militaries featured and want to see videos made for their favourites, most are complimentary of the overall channel they are viewing. The generality of the channels, and the wide range of military footage they rework, is part of the appeal.

This suggests that the audience for these videos, and the creators themselves, watch and make them out of an overall interest in militaries rather than a desire to celebrate or memorialize their nation. As one commenter puts it: 'This was the first video that got me into Yugoslav Wars, Chechen Wars, Eastern Europe conflicts and ultimately War Aesthetics. Thank you for everything'. The commenter describes their developing interest in these conflicts in terms of fandom – a 'getting into' these wars as one might get into a style of music, implying that they were unfamiliar with these conflicts and militaries previously. From this video, they developed an interest in other conflicts and militaries. I am terming this 'contents fandom' of militaries – a fannish interest in all things military, from military-themed media to military collecting and even military re-enactment. This is borrowed from the Japanese term 'contents tourism', which, as explained by Seaton, has been used since the 1990s to 'capture the idea that sets of contents (narratives, characters, locations, and other creative elements, e.g. music or graphic design) are often disseminated

simultaneously via multiple works and media formats' (2019: 2). 'Contents' is here a catchall term to describe the multiple ways of engaging with a particular subject. While vaporwar videos are not place-based as tourism is, a similar dynamic is at play where military subjects across media becomes the object of fandom, instead of a particular text.

On the surface, this is similar to the popular concept of 'transmedia storytelling' (Jenkins 2006). In practice, however, contents tourism is much broader, particularly when it comes to non-fiction subjects like the military, where it has been fruitfully utilized. Yamamura (2019) and Sugawa-Shimada (2019) discuss the slippages between interest in military anime, visiting sites connected to them, and interest in actual militaries and militarism. 'Contents tourism' for fictional military-themed media that is not based on an actual event, such as *Arpeggio*, about personified military warships in a dystopic future, connects to actual military subjects, such as visiting shipyards, and fans become interested in the broader military through them. The result is a wider interest in 'war content', with the anime becoming just one aspect of the fandom instead of the focal point. 'Contents tourism' connects to both fictional and non-fictional depictions of a subject, combining them into one fannish identity, rather than transmedia's focus on created (fictional) universes and a singular narrative world.

While Yamamura's and Sugawa-Shimada's work focused on the Japanese tourist market and identified specific anime as entry points, expanding the concept of 'contents tourism' to 'contents fandom' highlights how the combining of different media forms of a similar subject can create a fandom around the subject. This is not a new phenomenon, particularly when it comes to the military, but naming it makes this kind of fandom clearer. Vaporwar video-makers and commenters often show a considerable interest in, and knowledge of, multiple aspects of the military, discussing camouflage patterns, different kinds of equipment, tactics and weaponry (particularly guns) with a great deal of familiarity. They also show interest in other military media, making frequent reference to television shows, anime, films and most especially video games. Interest in vaporwar videos does not seem to be an interest in isolation. Rather, it is part of a broader interest in militaries and military content, not focused on nationalism, of which these videos are one form.

As suggested by the range of military content that commenters bring up, there is no lack of content for such fans. There is also encouragement in the media landscape to see the military in this way: as something to 'get into' as a pleasurable leisure activity. The contemporary media landscape is full of 'militainment', what Stahl defines as 'state violence translated into an object of pleasurable consumption' (2010: 6). Stahl argues that, while war-themed mass entertainment is not new, it has taken on new forms since the early 1990s. War became entertainment, something to be consumed, but also detached from meaning – war as a spectacle, rather than something that has to be argued for (as was the case with earlier, propaganda-focused war media). The importance of contemporary military media is that fighting is happening, rather than why it is happening. It is detached from something that we as citizens can participate in directly, becoming more like a sport that we can only observe and comment on. This is echoed by Asmolov's discussion of 'sofa warriors' (2021), where the Russia–Ukraine conflict is domesticated through participatory practices. Civilians 'join in' war efforts through their participation in arguments about it online, defending their side much as fans of a band or sports team would defend it against rivals, far away from the front lines or any other



direct physical connection. The military and its activities are, for many, part of domestic entertainment and life.

Military media have long been successful, and this spectacle has always been part of it, a point that Stahl someone elides in his work – militainment would not be of use to the media industry unless it was already established as a successful formula. However, contemporary military media arguably focus more on spectacle, through the lens of ‘realism’ or ‘authenticity’, than that of previous eras, something that audiences are assumed to want. This use of realism is focused on aesthetic detail and the vicarious joys of experience rather than other potential definitions. Gates (2005) argues that contemporary blockbuster ‘realistic’ combat films are specifically moral, rather than political – the soldiers involved are ‘good men’ who prove this by their willingness to do violence to protect and support each other regardless of their orders or whether the overall war is worthwhile or not, compared to 1970s and 1980s ‘realistic’ war films that show soldiers behaving in decidedly unheroic ways due to the traumas of combat and question whether (western) troops should be in the situation they are in at all. Within the contemporary realism discourse there is awareness that the deployment of a military might not be justified, but this does not extend so far as to question the need for a military or the morality of soldiers themselves, who are always fighting for the right reasons (especially if they are good at it), with authority figures as hindrances. Individual soldiers, rather than their country or ideology, is what matters. At the same time, as argued by Bjerre (2013), war and combat are shown as exciting alternatives to the mundanity of modern life, a sort of all-consuming extreme sport. This duality – fighting as inherently justified part of moral masculinity and fighting as cool and fun – is present in a wide variety of film and television worldwide, from prestige to trash. It presents the military as, at best, creating ‘good men’, but, if it fails at that, it is exciting and visually appealing.

This is especially the case when we look at arguably the most popular kind of militainment, and certainly the one most referenced by vaporwar commentators, video games. There has been a great deal of discussion of the tight linkages between the American military and the American gaming industry (Stahl 2010; Mirrlees 2016; Payne 2016; Kaempf 2018), a relationship in which the two sides work together in order to make games more ‘realistic’, which is assumed to be appealing to consumers in the same way realistic film is. This realism discourse is seen to make the military seem more appealing to potential recruits and to increase support for the American military and its activities among civilians. It is this latter point that is often brought up as a critique of this relationship (Nichols 2010; Nieborg 2010; Robinson 2012; Mirrlees 2016; Hammar and Woodcock 2020), with videogames – particularly the *America’s Army* series, which was developed directly by the American military – seen as a direct propaganda tool for the American military in terms of messaging and recruitment, bringing civilians ‘into’ the American military, making their empire-building and maintenance through violence seem fun and heroic, similar to the domesticated warfare of the Russian or Ukrainian ‘sofa warrior’.

However, this direct effect was not obvious in the vaporwar comments. There was a great deal of scepticism towards the American military and its motives, even while there was respect for its technology and capabilities. Propaganda is never total and must compete with other narratives around America and its military, particularly in spaces with many non-Americans participating (as is the case with the vaporwar community). I would argue that what military video games (and other militainment) end up promoting is

simply the military, rather than a specific military in a propaganda sense. As Stahl explains, post-9/11 games emphasize the ‘pure experience of battle [...] tend[ing] to avoid legal, ethical, moral, or ideological considerations’ (2010: 98). The military does not exist to support politics, ideology or even a nation, but because it itself has inherent (entertainment) value.

This is particularly true as one gets into military games that stress their realism, which, as Pötzsch (2017) and Mirrlees (2016) emphasize, is a selective one similar to what is found in film, an entertainment discourse focused almost entirely around depicting technology. Games popular among the vaporwar commenters and creators include not only the blockbuster *Call of Duty* series but also games like *War Thunder* and the *ARMA* series, which, while garnering less academic attention, distinguish themselves on their realism in terms of combat style and variety of combat options and market themselves to those who want a more ‘in-depth’ military experience. Guns, tanks and planes are reproduced in loving detail, and players have the option of controlling a wide variety of factions, all of which are, morally, fairly equal. They are also often not made by American studios, with *War Thunder* put out by Moscow-based Gaijin Entertainment and *ARMA* by the Czech developer Bohemia Interactive, complicating (although not entirely refuting) Mirrlees’s claim that these sort of war games are designed to ‘purge anxieties’ around the maintenance of the US empire (2016: 234). The worldwide popularity of the genre, and of militainment more generally, indicates that the appeal goes beyond assuaging American concerns. In a transnational landscape, they take on other meanings. To go back to Stahl, the point is to fight, not why they are fighting. Realism just means there are more options to do so, all of which are potentially heroic, anti-heroic or simply with cool weapons, with an emphasis on skill and effectiveness. This encourages an interest in all militaries, rather than a specific one, and detaches this interest somewhat from the causes (and nations) they are supposed to represent.

I do not want to suggest that these forms of militainment directly caused all the commenters and creators in the vaporwar scene to be fans of the military, nor that every player of a military game is a military fan (cf. Lukas 2020). It is also not a new stance, as this way of interacting with the military did not appear out of thin air during the Persian Gulf War – we can see this fannish fascination with military technology and experience throughout (media) history, particularly when it comes to toys and games. However, in this media landscape, it is unsurprising that ‘military’ is a fandom. Militaries are an object of fascination and interest, with a great deal to learn about, experience and appreciate, and a morality based around appealing ideas of skill, toughness and overall coolness. Moreover, it is a contents fandom because there is not one specific text, but rather, a wide variety of transnational media content around this subject, from American movies to European video games to Japanese animation. The fandom shapes and is shaped by contemporary militainment, using it to deepen their interest in the subject and support the texts that fit said interest.

As with other fandoms, it is participatory, and not just through enlisting or being a ‘sofa warrior’ for your country. ‘Amateur’ militainment and military fan communities can be found throughout social media platforms. Facebook groups, Instagram, Discord, Telegram and the 4chan messageboard /k/ were brought up by vaporwar commenters as places to find and share military content. War Aesthetics regularly linked to other YouTube channels that made military content, such as comparisons of different armies’ heavy machinery, kit

loadouts or weapons testing, and counted one popular maker of such content among his friends and collaborators. These YouTube channels are frequently more specialized in focus than mainstream militainment, with a wider range of militaries discussed, catering to those with a deeper interest in the subject and taking an even deeper joy in it. Occasionally, creators showed up in the comments section of War Aesthetics or other vaporwar creators, where they were noticed by other commenters. This indicates a network of user-generated militainment that helps to create a sense of shared affinity, as well as a shared knowledge base around what is important to know and care about that can be referenced in other user-generated military content. Comments for videos about particular militaries, for example, tended to make similar references to events about that military regardless of what was depicted in the video. To return to Turk and Johnson, there are clear interpretive conventions of military contents fandom, which participatory militainment reinforces. Showing an understanding of these conventions in comments shows that a viewer is part of the worldwide fandom.

## THE FORM OF VAPORWAR

Vaporwave is an internet-based music and aesthetics genre that rose to prominence in the 2010s. Musically, it is a genre of electronic music that centres ‘forgotten’ sounds of the 1980s and 1990s such as television commercials, Muzak and easy listening music, slowing down samples of them, adding reverb and stretching them into longer compositions (Tanner 2016; Born and Haworth 2017; Glitsos 2018). It shares some sonic similarities with other experimental electronic genres of the 2000s (Born and Haworth 2017), but its focus on ‘throwaway’ genres and sampling, its specific methods of distribution and its sense of aesthetics has given it a distinct character. As an internet-based genre, it has no physical centre to its scene, and most of its prominent names rely on pseudonyms to further obscure their offline identities. As Born and Haworth (2017) and Glitsos (2018) discuss, this internet base is key to vaporwave’s identity as a genre. To know about and consume vaporwave one also must be familiar with online spaces and subcultures.

Vaporwave’s other defining non-musical characteristic is its visual aesthetic. As with the music, vaporwave aesthetic style utilizes American commercial culture of the 1980s and 1990s, altered in a way to make them seem both familiar and strange. Television commercials, VHS glitches and early computer animation are collaged alongside pastels and neon, palm trees, Greco-Roman statues and Japanese lettering. Even the word aesthetic – often stylized as a e s t h e t i c, a common linguistic stylization that mimics vaporwave’s drawn-out sound – plays a role in vaporwave. Born and Haworth (2017) argue that not only is the visual style of vaporwave just as important to the genre as its sonic elements, but in its easy recognizability and fast deployment, it has become a meme in its own right, spread across the internet without necessarily being attached to vaporwave music. This memetic quality makes it familiar to internet-dwellers regardless of whether they are fans of the genre or not, something that makes it easy to pick up and utilize in other formats – such as war videos. The appealing visuals make whatever they are applied to seem cooler.

Vaporwave’s distortion of commercial iconography has led to it being theorized as a critique of capitalism (Tanner 2016; Nowak and Whelan 2018; McLeod 2018), which might be correct for the ‘core’ vaporwave musicians, but, as Glitsos (2018) and Born and Haworth (2017) outline, the genre can more

accurately described as one of nostalgia. Its audio and visual touchstones are the fuzzy media memories that people in their 20s and 30s have – VHS tapes, half-remembered commercials, graphics from the early internet. Producers might not remember these images and sounds themselves, but they connote nostalgia. Glitsos argues that vaporwave ‘plays with feelings of nostalgia, or more specifically, it plays with the idea of nostalgia for “something that never happened”’ (2018: 104). Its nostalgia is not quite sincere, with a self-awareness about the comedy in the ‘junk’ that it uses and the genre’s extreme stylization, but it is not quite fully ironic either, as it still brings forth sincere feelings towards a lost past. Vaporwave could best be described as ambivalent.

In this, its identity as an internet genre come to the forefront. Phillips and Milner (2017) argue that internet culture is inherently ambivalent – it is at once both ironic and sincere, antagonistic and supportive, humorous and serious. Expressions of it ‘inhabit [...] a full spectrum of purposes – all depending on who is participating, who is observing, and what set of assumptions each person brings to a given interaction’ (Phillips and Milner 2017: 10). This ambivalence is familiar for those who spend a lot of time in online spaces. Therefore, it is not that vaporwave and its memetic offshoots are sincere or insincere, but rather, they are both, in a way that makes sense in the culture that vaporwave comes out of. Using it to signify nostalgia and ‘the past’ signifies that you are part of internet culture and can make sense of ambivalence.

It is from this point that vaporwave aesthetics become part of online far-right movements, the so-called ‘alt-right’ (Bogerts and Fielitz 2019; Jukic 2019; Teixeira Pinto 2019). Bogerts and Fielitz have ‘vaporwave remixes’ as a major category of German right-wing memes, as these visuals make ‘historical references less “old-fashioned” and more appealing to a younger audience’ (2019: 147). Teixeira Pinto addresses how the alt-right’s ‘excessive sentimental yearning for the 1980s and 1990s’ lead to fashwave and Trumpwave, genres that



Figure 1: The thumbnail for War Aesthetics’ video ‘Angolan safari’, featuring the channel’s logo.

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take vaporwave's internet-based nostalgia and turn them towards right-wing and nationalistic ends, 'tying the mythical origin of white civilization to the American Dream and the joyful promises of the early internet years' (2019: 328), a point also explored by Tuters (2021). To this, we can add Jukić's (2019) exploration of 'Serbwave', vaporwave-style music videos that glorify Serbian nationalism and the violence of the Balkan wars, and probably many other micro-variations. Vaporwave's use in alt-right contexts has become a meme in and of itself, with parodies of fashwave's particular catchphrases and visual cues used to mock it.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, ideological vaporwave can also be a left-wing genre, with Sovietwave, Yugowave and labo(u)rwave – a collective term for communist-focused vaporwave – also popular on YouTube. With its ambivalent nostalgia for 'something that never happened' (Glitsos 2018: 104), vaporwave can be used for many different positions, expressed in internet vernacular.

3. For example: <https://imgur.com/t/fashwave/Wy2M7Jg>. Accessed 5 October 2022.

This suits vaporwar's militainment-based broadness. As with the right-wing content discussed by Bogerts and Fielitz (2019) and Tuters (2021), the sound and look makes military material cooler – more aesthetic, more internet. It is an internet-friendly version of militaries and combat, with appealing connections to 'nonconformist', edgier subcultures (Teixeira Pinto 2019), a military fandom for the contemporary age that still connects to the past. Vaporwar videos are not the only way to express military contents fandom, or the only fan-made videos about military subjects that can be found on YouTube, as mentioned. Vaporwar is, however, an interesting cluster of content creators that produces work with specific textual characteristics. The qualities of vaporwave itself add another layer to the military footage:

[D]amn this is fucking great, the heavy intro (and the synchronised rocket system at the begining) and than back to the parade. After that back transition to more action and heavy music. I also love the cool rocket pod reload, overall really good video man!

'Compared to an average music videos based on military footage I like how you chose retro footage to match the music and then used some effects on top of that to give it the right vibe'. Quality editing work and good deployment of vaporwave visual techniques like glitches and colour changes do not go unnoticed. Viewers frequently ask for the names of the songs used in the videos, if they are not freely given, and speak of the videos as a way to find new music. While militaries are the focal point, the sonic and visual aesthetics of vaporwave, and how they are utilized by the different creators, are what makes the genre special to its fans.

## DISCUSSING VAPORWAR

Therefore, to situate vaporwar, we must consider the content and the presentation. Vaporwar is a specific kind of fanvid for military contents fandom. The communicative goal of these fanvids is to enhance and highlight the visual aesthetics of the military. The editing techniques serve to make a statement about the aesthetic appeal of each featured military, with a focus on the equipment and soldier performing his duties. Most of the channels surveyed used almost exclusively 'real' footage, that is, archival footage of militaries rather than fictional television or films, in keeping with militainment's focus on tech-and-soldiers realism. However, references are made to fictional militainment,



which form part of the content of military contents fandom, and some creators have begun to dabble in making 'fictional' vaporwar as well. It is fan-produced militainment for a young, global audience, which suggests a need to rethink how we understand military media and its fans.

As with professional militainment, there is less interest in the ideology of the militaries, although as it is pro-military, it is largely a right-wing, leaning towards alt-right, subculture. However, pro-Communist sentiments are often expressed, particularly on USSR, Warsaw Pact or Yugoslavia videos and, while disputed, are not dismissed as outside agitation. The primacy of skill, toughness and visual aesthetics to military contents fandom allows for different political stances as long as these core values are maintained: 'Eastern socialism wasn't as faggy as it's [*sic*] western counterpart. So the loss of the USSR makes for a more boring and stagnant world'. The formal ideology here is not as important as the perceived toughness and aesthetic appeal of the Soviet Union, held up as an important part of the entertainment value of military subjects. This separates vaporwar from the ideological vaporwave offshoots discussed above, despite connecting to them in some ways. Fashwave, with its militaristic focus, is undoubtedly one of the genre's major influences, and some creators are explicit about their connection to it. The 'Serbwave' creator profiled by Jukic (2019) is a stated fan of War Aesthetics and shows up in the comments of those videos. Racist and bigoted statements towards minorities and support of right-wing movements like the loose 'boogaloo' militia groupings are generally tolerated, and many commentators see the genre as a right-wing one. When War Aesthetics deleted his channel, for example, many fans believed that it had been banned by YouTube as part of the site's attempt to disassociate itself from extreme-right content, which was not the case according to statements made by the creator before the deletion and its subsequent restoration.

However, some accounts, including War Aesthetics and JOC, reject the fashwave label when it is brought up in comparison to them. Videos about the Soviet Union and other Warsaw Pact countries from vaporwar creators regularly make their way to labourwave playlists, which align themselves with the left. On some level, this denial of fashwave is what Teixeira Pinto refers to as 'fascist-curious', a sort of 'plausible deniability' in their use of far-right and racist tropes that is cast as irony and 'read as anti-normative or anti-conformist' (2019: 326), a staple of internet communication. This is a point echoed by Miller-Idriss (2019), who stresses the complications of signs in contemporary right-wing culture. The online right enjoys the idea of having 'secret' symbols that those not in their subculture do not know about and might even use and enjoy without realizing their background. Vaporwar operates in this specific grey area, in which right-wing origins and appeal can be plausibly denied by obscurity, appreciated by those outside of alt-right subcultures, a continuing joke played on 'normies' and left-wingers.

Yet, it can also be seen as a reflection on militainment's lack of ideological basis for the military and fighting. While conservative in outlook, it is not particularly about any cause other than that of fighting itself and the virtues generally associated with the military (which are, to be fair, largely conservative ones). Ideological expression in non-fashwave vaporwar videos is more likely to be a sort of generalized anti-government stance, not dissimilar to mainstream militainment. Ideology matters less than military coolness, as shown by the role that nominally left-wing armies play in the genre, and the appreciation that viewers have for them: 'I'm no communist... but this shit is



dope'. It also speaks to a more general disillusionment in military fan cultures with politics in an electoral sense. As with commercial militainment, participatory militainment sees government and authority as a restriction on military fun. This is not counter to alt-right belief systems, which have always had a strong libertarian streak, but is worth noting when discussing vaporwar as a form.

The fuzzy ideology also indicates that military contents fandom has a general, rather than national, military interest, in comparison to other forms of participatory military media that are more explicitly based on ethnic or nationalist lines (Asmolov 2021). Variety is prized among creators and commenters. Creators seek out material that has not already been extensively covered by others and seek to show their subscribers something new, which is part of what keeps them coming back. Some creators do have favourites, but these are largely aesthetic favourites, rather than militaries with a personal or ethnic connection. Commenters have favourites as well and make frequent requests of content creators for videos featuring them, but it is expressed within this broader framework of military enthusiasm: '[L]ove your stuff, could you do a vid on the French SAS, the 1er RPIMA?' Favourite militaries deserve the vaporwar treatment in order to show that they are worth other military fans knowing and celebrating.

Like other vaporwave, vaporwar looks towards the relatively recent past for its golden age. Most vaporwar videos, as discussed, feature Cold War militaries or other combat from the era. In this, they follow video games, in which the Second World War or Cold War scenarios are popular as they 'are more likely to feel right because they present an uncontroversial, black-and-white morality' (Hammond 2020: 24). While actual Second World War footage is hard to find, and, having been popular for over 50 years, is both a *cliché* and not actually remembered, even fuzzily, by the young people who make vaporwar, the Cold War, being of the same era as the main elements of vaporwave, is precisely at the level of half-remembered and scorned that suits it.

It also, as Hammond (2007, 2020) notes, is arguably the last time that the military was seen to have meaning in a traditional sense of the term. The Cold War, while never 'truly' fought, nevertheless had two clear sides with relatively equal positioning who both favoured visible displays of military power – like a good video game. When contemporary conflicts are featured, they are usually Eastern European, such as fighting in Ukraine or Chechnya, which recall the Cold War in terms of aesthetics, equipment and physicality. 'Cutting-edge' technology is, perhaps surprisingly, less appealing. Vaporwave style allows for nostalgic indulgence while still feeling contemporary.

This is highlighted in the comments, where Cold War weapons and militaries from both sides are praised as 'beautiful' or 'aesthetic' in comparison to more recent equipment: 'The good old times when Germans where [*sic*] fighting with some high quality Soviet stuff. Beautiful' and '[C]rack sip yep, m81 woodland was the best camo the Corps ever used. none of this digital crap'. After all, what matters most is that these militaries, either solicited by viewers or found by creators, look cool. The focus on aesthetics is the main quality of the videos, and the main evaluative point for viewers. Videos are cut in order to highlight the aesthetic appeals of each military, according to what military fans find most worth looking at – guns, uniforms and camouflage patterns, technical equipment, heavy machinery such as tanks and planes. Commentors highlight these details when giving compliments: 'M81, M16A2, PASGT and ALICE gear. It doesn't get much more aesthetic than this'. The surface level,

visual appeal is the point. Vaporwar is a visual, rather than narrative, genre, which separates it from other forms of militainment. While commercial militainment markets itself on spectacle, there is still a narrative focus. Here, in the participatory, fan-based sphere, this can be dropped. The subtext of commercial militainment – that this is all worth it for the visual spectacle of the military – becomes, in the fan sphere, the main text.

Vaporwar is therefore not just a celebration of the military, but an internet-based, aesthetic and nostalgic celebration of the military. This means that its nostalgia is ambivalent, drawing on vaporwave's combination of sincerity and irony to be nostalgic for a past era of the military while not committing itself too strongly to the yearning that nostalgia is said to represent. Its devotion is to militaries, not a cause. At the same time, it also commits itself to being part of internet subcultures. By making it vaporwave, it is clear who this work is for. It is not just for military fans, but military fans that can understand and make sense of internet culture and aesthetics. The videos only make sense with an understanding of the underlying meanings of the genre. By combining vaporwave and the military, vaporwar not only updates military nostalgia for an internet age but sets itself apart from other militainment by making clear who it is for – other online fans.

## CONCLUSION

As with all forms of fanvid, vaporwar cannot be understood in a vacuum. To understand why these videos thrive on YouTube, we need to understand the communities they come out of, and the interpretive conventions that come from these communities.

Essentially, these are videos by military content fans for military content fans. They borrow from the traditions of contemporary 'militainment' (Stahl 2010) that sees militaries as valuable for their own reasons, rather than a firmer ideological or propaganda purpose.

They are fan-made and for a transnational fan audience, which means that they have a clearer focus on what fans want to see, without needing to appeal to a wider demographic. The aesthetic appreciation of the military, regardless of origin, is the genre's main purpose, making the subtext of commercial militainment the main text. That this is appreciated by military fans who make and view these videos is clear in the tone of the comments left on them.

However, it is not only that this is content for military fans, but that this is content for young fans of the military, those that are familiar with internet culture and find it appealing. Making over military footage in vaporwave style makes it look good to these fans, but also suggests what might be missing from contemporary militaries. It is nostalgic for the half-remembered Cold War in which the military was seen to have a much clearer purpose than it does today. This highlights the contradictions in contemporary militainment, even at the fan level – war does not require purpose to be appealing, but the lack of meaning still haunts it. Vaporwar is a way to recall this era, while still being part of contemporary life and culture. It is military nostalgia with an internet face.

That there is such a thing as military contents fandom and aesthetic-based appreciation videos for it does raise some troubling implications. To return to Walter Benjamin (1968, 1979), it is in this aestheticization of war, of appreciating war for its own sake, that we find the roots of fascism. While vaporwar does not invent this for the contemporary era, drawing as it does

on a constellation of other military media, its existence highlights the way in which military subjects have become aestheticized in the contemporary era. Vaporwar articulates what professional military media hints at – that war itself is the thing worth appreciating.

## FUNDING

This research was funded by the European Joint Programming Initiative Cultural Heritage (JPICH) Digital Heritage Program, reference number JPICH.DH.17.010.

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## SUGGESTED CITATION

Waysdorf, Abby S. (2022), 'Vaporwar and military contents fandom', *Journal of Fandom Studies*, 10:1, pp. 19–37, [https://doi.org/10.1386/jfs\\_00048\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/jfs_00048_1)

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