"The most Cinematic Game yet"

Ed Vollans

Bournemouth University

Abstract

An antecedent promotional practice, the film trailer has a history stretches from the formulation of the film industry itself. Yet no work found explores early videogame trailers. This paper tracks the early history of the videogame trailer exploring how it commuted from its use in the film industry, to become applied within the videogame sector. Using press archives, this paper pieces together a lost history; exploring how this new forms of promotion was understood, and discussed in the public sphere.

Keywords: Trailer ; Videogames ; Press archives ; Discourse analysis

The Practice of using a trailer to introduce a game is not new, nor is it unique to these games; *Final Fantasy X*, *Xenosaga* and *Star Ocean* all use trailers in their introductions. Unlike these examples however, the [*Lord of the Rings; Two Towers*] and the [*Return of the King*] trailers enjoy a direct relationship with major theatrical films, and the trailers certainly exploit that relationship.

(Brookey & Booth, 2006; 221, italics added)

After all, what people are liking/disliking is a short video clip and not the actual gameplay quality, which is central to how a game sells over its lifecycle.

(Harding-Rolls, in BBC Technology, 2016)

Regardless of the purpose, form, or product represented, promotional trailers are short films. Operating as short audio-visual texts they may hold a number of purposes at any given time: variously acting as promotion, cultural or industrial commentary, and can be used as entertainment in their own right. The use of the trailer for a medium and industry other than film however, belies the very history of the term "trailer", rooted in the film industry. As Janet Staiger has observed, the term "trailer" moved from meaning the end of the reel of film (in opposition to the leader) and later to apply to short films generally, contained on the shorts reel, and later still, to apply to a specific form of promotion for films (1990, 26). This commutation of the term is central to this paper.

As a term, "trailer" is a partially anchored, partially free-floating signifier that may evoke a history of film; an industry that in various places competes, complements and converges with the videogame industry. Yet despite the ubiquity of the videogame trailer and of gaming as an industry in its own right, game trailers are still discussed in similar terms to those of the film industry. Indeed, the trailer as a form has a history and discourse so rooted in cinema that this association has even crept into legal definitions, seeing the film trailer as a "short

107

_____
Kinephanos, ISSN 1916-985X
"'It's [not just] in the game': the promotional context of video games", November 2017, www.kinephanos.ca

film that advertises a film" (Ontario Reg 452/05). In reducing the trailer to that of an intertextual reference operating within the same medium as the product, this legal definition of the trailer simplifies the complexity of the history, reception, and construction of the form itself. Lacking legal and academic consideration, the use of trailers to promote an industry distinct from film represents both an interesting point of industrial interaction and a complex twist in understanding the trailer as a short *film* that sells *another film*.

Despite the clear intersection of two industries, in this instance those of cinema and videogaming, little work has been done to explore how game trailers differ from, and overlap with film, and function overall within the gaming sector. Resultantly, when trailers are discussed, either in academic literature, trade press or elsewhere in the public domain, the very term "trailer" becomes an unwieldy notion that requires further consideration and definition. Of the existing work exploring the trailer, much has been completed on the history of the trailer within the film industry (cf. Staiger, 1990; Hamel, 2012; Johnston, 2008, 2009; Kernan, 2004) yet almost nothing appears on the videogame trailer. Resultantly, basic questions remain in our understanding of what is now a key element of the gaming industry, when did the first trailer emerge? In what context? What did they look like? and what might they say about the gaming (or film) industry at this time? Beyond such fundamental historical questions, specifics arise around definition; can an understanding of film trailers be applied to videogames given the industrial and historical differences? Accounting for the lack of definition surrounding the film trailer (Johnston, 2009; Greene, Johnston, & Vollans, 2014; Vollans, 2015), a study of videogame trailers aids the understanding of elements unique to each industry, and engages with this wider discourse.

This paper takes the first steps towards interrogating the intersection of film promotion within the games industry, while adding to discourse within a deeply complex area of study. Far from being the final word on the topic, it is exploratory in nature, striving to provide a solid, empirically evidenced foundation for future work in this area. Taking no known definition of the video game trailer as its starting point, this contribution focuses on what is being called a

trailer and, based on this nomenclative category,[1] tracks the initial emergence of the form within the industry broadly until the turn of the millennium. This study is formed of three sections. The first of these outlines the case for studying trailers, linking this paper to a steadily expanding field of paratextual studies and debates therein. It calls for a focused understanding of trailers that moves beyond simplifications, and reductions of the form and justifies the broad methodological choices made for this study. The second section outlines this methodological approach in detail, it focuses on the limitations and results, clearly demonstrating the approach used and decisions made. Finally, the third presents an interpretation of these results, linking together the methods with the theory and wider discussion of both gaming, cinema, and previous studies.

In keeping with previous historical studies on the *book* trailer (Davila, 2010; Voigt, 2013; Vollans, 2016), this paper aims to unpack the complex manner in which the videogame trailer moved from the perceived ownership of cinema to that of the videogame industries. In the process of exploring this movement, this paper cannot account for all the possible rationales and instances that make up the industry's collective decision-making. Rather, the approaches used here sketch out an initial media history from which to spur and frame further study.

Videogame Trailers: the theory so far

Writing in 1977, Stephen Heath noted that any film (and we can extend this to almost any other cultural object) is surrounded by a range of materials that support it, provide a rationale for consumption, simultaneously extending the product's experience, and can be: "recognized in a whole host of epiphenomena from trailers to remakes, from weekly reviews to star magazines, from publicity stills to mementoes (rubber sharks, tee-shirts)" (1977, 28). Here, Heath uses the term "epiphenomena", foregrounding the later work *Palimpsestes* (1982) and *Paratexts* by Gérard Genette (1987, trans 1997). Writing about books, Genette theorised that paratexts are those things that bring a book into being, that exist outside and inside the words on the page to denote the content as belonging to a particular cultural form; from author

_____

[1] In doing so, the author acknowledges the limitations of treating trailers as a vernacular genre but argues that sustained aesthetic and audience studies are the next step in understanding the distinction (if any) between demos, cut scenes etc., and trailers.

interviews to the title pages, to the font used for the book itself. Building on this, Jonathan Gray later conceptualises the paratextual forms as "air locks" that helps us acclimatise to a new text (2010, 25). Under the hypernym "paratext", Genette identified two categories therein; *epitexts*, existing distinctly separately from the text: these being production notes, dust jackets, author interviews etc., and *peritexts* that exist within the (book) text. This latter category may include titles, subtitles, forewords, footnotes etc. (1997, xviii). Despite an artificial distinction between the two forms, this latter distinction translates quite readily to the popular understanding of [film] trailers[2] and ties into much of the existing discourse that has sought to theorise them in these terms. As Lisa Kernan writes of the film trailer;

> to be precise, trailers are film paratexts. As Gérard Genette has characterized them, paratexts are those textual elements that emerge from and impart significance to a (literary) text but aren't considered integral to the text itself, such as all prefatory material, dust jacket blurbs, advertisements and reviews. Specifically, trailers can be seen as instances of a film's "public epitext." (Kernan, 2004, 7)

Advertising serves as a marker of how the industry wants its products to be seen, as an indicator of how the audience is addressed, and is encouraged to see these products. Thus the trailer alongside any other promotional paratexts become a valuable resource in the history of the videogame.

For all its value however, the trailer remains absent from videogaming history. Mark J.P Wolf notes that the industry became recognisable as we know it today, thanks to its movement into the domestic space of the home from the arcade spaces that held cabinet-sized games alongside mechanical and electromechanical games (Wolf, 2008, 64). This movement from the industrial space (possessed by commercial buyers) to the space of the domestic consumer, opened up new market demographics. These domestic buyers typically spent differing amounts of disposable income, rather than being business owners looking for long-term industrial investments. The transition between public and private spaces ultimately

---

[2] Thanks to home entertainment, trailers for films do of course exist as both peritextual – e.g. on the DVD release, and as epitexts in the cinema – this duality is an issue in any study of trailers as they are both part of, and separate from the film experience (cf. Zanger, 1998). The same may be said for games, but this is as yet, an unsubstantiated claim requiring further empirical work from the audience perspective.

110

_____
Kinephanos, ISSN 1916-985X
"'It's [not just] in the game': the promotional context of video games", November 2017, www.kinephanos.ca

developed into what Bernadette Flynn refers to as the "digital hearth" (2003), and resulted in a wealth of promotional materials aimed at the public. Marketing the gaming industry's wares in this manner meant operating within known formats of audio-visual communication and (socio-cultural as well as legal) codes of promotion; but also in explain how these new products worked. Operating within the same space as, and alongside, advertising for domestic products, early videogame promotion focused on introducing the very form of the home console entertainment to new audiences (Young, 2007). While an observation, rather than sustained study, Bryan-Mitchell Young notes, echoing Johnston's work in film trailers and 3D technology (2009), that advertising served as a way to educate the public on the use of a new technology, as well as illustrating the intended target consumer, demarcating a target demographic (Young, 2007). In doing so, games promotion forms a valuable marker of industrial focus, able to be deconstructed and analysed for industry information, yet suggests a distinction between, modes of promotional address. In a discussion of early television promotion, Young suggests that; "Home videogames and videogames systems were once advertised in a manner quite similar to staple items such as clothing, food, or activities" (2007, 235). Interestingly, this implicitly connects with later work studying early advertisements once found on the trailer reel. Keith J. Hamel discussing the history of the film trailer, sees a distinction between antecedent film trailer forms of the propaganda film (studio promotion of work in progress productions) and the commercial film (advertising for soap, guns, and other products) (Hamel, 2012). As both these promotional forms would likely have appeared in the same discursive spaces as film-specific promotion, it is highly likely given the time frame discussed, that they would be included in the shorts reel and thus qualify as trailers in the vernacular sense. What we see within these examples is an emerging distinction between the structural address of advertising and that of trailers; as Hamel (problematically) suggests of the propaganda film: "[t]hese films sold the image of the studio to the public, but since they did not focus on a particular film, they cannot be defined as trailers" (2012, 270). Similarly, Young implies a distinction that is later developed by Scott Brendan Cassidy; suggesting that advertisements are somehow, obviously, and structurally different from trailers. Explicitly however, Cassidy writes that:

> Early television *commercials* for videogames had several common features. First, *commercials* frequently showed the player interacting with the interface. That is, the

advertisement showed people moving the joystick or pressing the button. Typically, these shots would consist of exaggeratedly happy teens and their parents. Television *commercials* that employed this aesthetic were very common during the late 1970s until the mid to late 1980s. Eventually, *advertisers* begin to show less and less of people actually playing videogames. [… Eventually moving to a product that] is presented not as a game that enthusiastic teens enjoy playing, but rather like a digital movie. Storyline is emphasized and characters speak lines of dialogue. Television *commercials* for videogames abandon the old aesthetic for a much more cinematic style. In short, videogame *advertisements* start looking just like movie *trailers*. (Cassidy, 2011, 298, italics added)

The discussions of promotion by Young (2007), and Cassidy (2011),[3] refer to "adverts" rather than "trailers", and they centre around the construction of a narrative setting associated with the tangible goods promoted. To put this aesthetic in terms of advertising theory, it matches with the work of Padgett and Allen, who suggest "described story stimuli" in which a causal, chronological narrative is at work, enacted by characters regardless of the aesthetics of story organisation. "Typically such stimuli involve[s] actors with motives, an event sequence, and a setting that has physical, social, and temporal components" (Padgett & Allen, 1997, 53). Such a narrative might be an arguing family, united by a parent figure handing each family member a game handset (or in other contexts a bucket of fried chicken). In placing the object of play (and promotion) within a scenario, the story stimuli here is not the game itself but the ludic act of playing. This conception of narrative organisation for adverts differs from the (idealised [film]) trailer format in which any actors are a component of the product itself, and in which the story stimuli is the product itself. As Kernan states: "Within trailers' persuasive metatextual system, the rhetoric of story [as both promotion and product] operates at a metanarrative level. Narrative theory's concern with "who tells" a film story, is here reconfigured as "what sells" a film story" (Kernan, 2004, 54).

Essentially then, discussions of the trailer and advert differ at both a nomenclative, and narrative level; in adverts the product promoted is identified as placed within a narrative

---

[3] This also applies to similar discussions of gaming and advertising by Deborah Chambers (2012), suggesting a wider trend in the discourse.

world, rather than *being* a narrative world as with trailers. Yet little evidence exists to suggest that audiences, or creators share this distinction (cf. Johnston, Vollans, & Greene, 2016).

Without an extensive and sustained study of games promotion, their aesthetics, reception, and nomenclature, it is not possible to continue this element of the discussion fully; a study of aesthetics of the entire industry is insurmountable and reception changes over time necessitating the need for a specific period of study, unaffected by retrospective memory recall. However, it may be possible to place Cassidy's (unverified) claims on a timeline for future study. Cassidy, after all, tantalisingly suggests a moment at which videogame trailers emerged, or least when advertising began looking like trailers. If trailers exist primarily as a nomenclative genre, and it seems unlikely that members of the press or public would debate the definition with sustained rigour, when such promotion appears to look like film trailers they are likely to be referred to as such. In short, tracking the term "trailer" in the press in relation to videogames can serve as a marker of wider public discussion; but remains a poor substitute for conducting contemporaneous studies.

While the issues of terminology and aesthetics remain relevant, and part of the wider debate around trailers, this paper views videogame trailers as epitexts, separated from the game through temporal and special shifts. This deliberately side-steps issues of trailer aesthetics (e.g. a scenario when a "trailer" may be better understood as an "advert") and better addresses issues of structural aesthetic determinism; that the trailers do not automatically reflect the game (or film's content), nor do they need to look like trailers to function and be received as such by individuals. It is important to understand that there is no neutral, nor natural relationship between the promotional materials and the games being represented; to assume otherwise is to fall into deterministic discourse that stems from discourse surrounding film trailers (cf. Greene, Johnston, & Vollans, 2014, 111). Given the lack of aesthetic standardisation of the trailer, the attention of this paper turns to the point, and context at which "trailers" initially emerged. Indeed, shifting the emphasis away from the aesthetics of the trailer better accounts for the historical elements of this study, attempting to better understand the moment at which "adverts" became "trailers".

113

_____
Kinephanos, ISSN 1916-985X
"'It's [not just] in the game': the promotional context of video games", November 2017, www.kinephanos.ca

Methodology & Data Management

Tracking terminology as it emerges and changes overtime relies inherently on records of the words used. It is not possible to cover all terms for trailers (*bande-annonce* for example in French) within one dataset, nor is it possible to adequately conduct retrospective interviews with audiences. However, with a comprehensive study of newspaper and magazine discourse it is possible to track broad usage. Indeed, work by Vollans (2015, 2016) partially being addressed and expanded here, has already demonstrated the use of the press in tracking discourse. In that work is it suggested the use of press nomenclature forms a "feedback loop" in which public discourse may be shaped (2015, 120). As one of the largest multi-national databases of cultural commentary, the Nexis press archives form the basis for this study. The archives themselves cover a wealth of newspaper and industry reports that allow for secondary confirmation of source material, and comprehensive data collection. Relying on press rather than audience commentary offers a more stable indicator of the discourse surrounding videogame promotion, but does not necessarily allow for the collection of the trailers themselves. As an archive of words prioritised over audio-visual content, any visual references may be subject to "link rot" (Crystal, 2004, 202): as an archive of videos then, Nexis is inadequate; further justifying the focus on trailers as epitexts.

Searching the database for the term "trailer" generates a range of results that cover books, theatre, videogames as well as vehicular trailers, all within a variety of contexts. Narrowing the search parameters down, however, is itself problematic. Searches for "videogame trailer" may not accurately generate references to videogame trailers identified by title rather than industry or format (e.g. "The new Mario Bros trailer…" may refer to either the film or the game). However, given the impossible task of searching for every videogame title and every use of the term "trailer" it makes sense to use the constituent elements, e.g. videogame and trailer together, in association with the archive search function. Reviewing the Nexis archives for "videogame trailer" without restriction provides more results than can be readily managed by the search mechanisms; in excess of the maximum result returned, and is therefore a restrictive search. Searching for the terms; video, AND game, AND trailer, within the same search entry represents a broadly comprehensive search term that, thanks to the search mechanism accounts for variations between those of videogame and video game, singular and

114

_____
Kinephanos, ISSN 1916-985X
"'It's [not just] in the game': the promotional context of video games", November 2017, www.kinephanos.ca

plural references, spelling variations and allows for flexibility within the context of the results generated. Using constituent elements allows for variation between them within the same paragraph, sentence or topic – "the videogame trailer", "the game […] has a trailer" etc., are also included in the results. The results of these search parameters however, will inevitably raise many results with little or no impact upon the discussion herein. In light of this, each result listed needs to be verified by the researcher; consulted for relevance and contribution to the study. Given the wealth of results, verification of each reference possible is largely impractical in the first instance without organisation. Resultantly, it helps to first pinpoint key moments of development in the media history through applying temporal parameters; limiting each search to time frames, albeit arbitrary ones as part of this exploratory study. Breaking the initial results down by decade of publication we can see an (expected) increase, reflecting industrial development.

Year by decade	References (unverified)
1960-70	0
1970-80	2
1980-90	88
1990-00	895
2000-10	6746

Figure 1: Number of references by decade

Based on the results listed in figure 1. it is clear then, that the turn of the new millennium saw a significant increase in the use of "trailer" within discourse. With no results prior to 1970 found, over the next 40 years the frequency of the term "trailer" increases dramatically as we approach, and surpass the millennium. *Prima facie*, this connects with the rise of wider video sharing culture, YouTube.com being launched in 2005, the maturation of the internet, and the use of internet events as news – consider if you will, the number of times an online video or tweet gets mentioned in the contemporary press. While the twenty years of 1990-2010 indicate over 7000 results, a further breakdown is needed to manage these. Indeed, it should be noted here that part-way through this study, elements of the dataset were lost owing to faulty data retention methods.[4] Subsequent changes to the Nexis archives used in this study

---

[4] Amongst many colleagues who rallied to help save the data, and support the mental health of the author, the author is particularly indebted to Dr Sarah Hill, for her cool use of logic and emotional support in the face of what can only be described as a 'data salvage operation'.

mean it is impractical to continue it (beyond the late 1990s), without repeating data collection which will generate different results.

Year (beginning 1st Jan)	References (unverified)
1990-91	18
1991-92	31
1992-93	91
1993-94	203
1994-95	102
1995-96	92
1996-97	65
1997-98	64
1998-99	76
1999-00	153
2000-01	188
2001-02	160
2002-03	165
2003-04	198
2004-05	252
2005-06	183
2006-07	1569
2007-08	2521
2008-09	1050
2009-10	460

Figure 2: Breakdown of references 1990-2010

The complete dataset presented here in its initial form however, can still be used to understand the early field of games promotion. Figure 2 demonstrates, broadly speaking, a year on year increase of the unverified term with some fluctuations. By frequency alone, this twenty-year period likely represents the most important two decades for understanding the history of the videogame trailers' emergence. In reviewing this collective dataset (Figures 1 and 2), some initial points can be made. There is a spike in the number of references in 1993-95, and 2006-08, though without further verification this is a limited observation. It is worth noting that 2005 saw the development of YouTube.com as a video sharing site, and that the references should increase dramatically thereafter is perhaps no coincidence. However, 2009-10 offers a truly anomalous result that warrants further investigation; with a significant drop in the frequency of the search results generated. A number of possibilities can be suggested for this at this stage; rolling firewalls on individual newspaper archives accessed through Nexis is a possibility and this may have been a result of the database changes similar to those that now limit the findings. It is further possible at this time that games trailers are operating

116

_____
Kinephanos, ISSN 1916-985X
"'It's [not just] in the game': the promotional context of video games", November 2017, www.kinephanos.ca

under a different nomenclature, or that references to the industry ("games", or "videogames" or "video […] games") are no longer relevant. Similarly, the discourse may have moved away from the archive of the newspapers included in the database into other platforms; there is the possibility of newspapers (increasingly digital at this point) referencing trailers through hyperlinks, rather than this very specific nomenclature. Owing to the possibility of a vernacular shift, and the retrospective nature of this study, and the focus on the emergence of the trailer in the games industry, it is hoped that exploring the vernacular beyond 2000 will form the focus of another study and another dataset that fully explores these potential practices.

This exploratory search generated 7641 results in total, and an initial review found that this corpus included duplicated results (despite a duplication filter being used) and results irrelevant to the key terms of this paper, but generated as part of the search algorithm nonetheless.[5] With such a large dataset, this data search was reviewed by the researcher through Nexis preview function, which highlighted the search terms in context. This process facilitated the rapid identification of the context in which the terms were generated, and where needed allowed an in-depth reading of the content. Essentially then, each result was manually reviewed for relevance and immediate context. It is possible that human error caused some results to be overlooked, despite reviewing the hits from each decade multiple times.

Assessing the unfiltered dataset and addressing it chronologically, we can see that of the 90 results generated prior to 1/1/1990, only one of these references being verified as relevant to the study. Between 1/1/1990 and 1/1/2000, 894 results were generated with only 9 results found to reference videogame trailers. Dealing with these in turn, we can see a comparable process to that of book trailers (cf. Vollans, 2016), suggesting a similar pattern in changes to the vernacular (and thus the development of the vernacular genre).

---

[5] A surprising number of mobile library 'trailers' were stocked with both videos and games during this period and accounted for a number of results herein. There is no indication that these impacted on the term 'videogame trailer' however except to proliferate industry norms of goods promotion via home entertainment systems.

Discussion

The single reference pre-1990 to a videogame trailer is a derogatory discussion of the feature film, The Wizard (1989); in which the film critic Gary Arnold derides the film as being so full of references to game play it was in actually a "feature-length trailer for Nintendo video games" (Arnold, 1989). Indeed, in keeping with this theme in the same year, Kempley of the Washington Post described the film as "nothing but a commercial" (1989). Though only one of these instances was generated through the search result, it is an example of the ways in which the trailer has moved across different fields, and of the negative discourse surrounding trailers. Consider that this earliest known reference to the concept of a video game trailer echoes a similar articulation in 1993 of book trailers. In this incarnation it was suggested that arts programmes should be made distinct from trailer and adverts for products through intellectual rigour in the content (Januszczak, 1993). Appearing within five years of each other, both Arnold and Waldemar Januszczak articulate the concept of the trailer as one of an intertextual vehicle. In doing so, both demonstrate a simplified and perhaps derisory understanding of the trailer as being an unsophisticated free sample; primarily through its ability to reference another cultural object. Arnold's 1989 example is the only one found within the corpus, and would stand out as truly anomalous were it not for the comparison with book trailers. Caution must be used in this claim, and there must be no suggestion that Januszczak's comments are causal of the vernacular movement. Instead they must be seen as a possible illustration of the way in which the term changes with time. This articulation intersects with Staiger's observation that the term trailer stabilised in relation to film promotion in the "late teens" of the 20th Century (1990), suggesting that this stabilisation is not a reification.

The dearth of direct or indirect references prior to the 1990s and the increase in references after this time support the hypothesis that the emergence of the videogame trailer as a nomenclative form came around within the 1990s. It is however, worth noting the context in which other trailers emerged at this time. As Vollans (2016) has observed, book trailers emerged first on television in the late 1980s and online in the 1990s. Interestingly this timeframe overlaps the establishment of home video that saw the use of trailers and promotion on home formats, yet references to this is absent from much of the reports found in

118

_____
Kinephanos, ISSN 1916-985X
"'It's [not just] in the game': the promotional context of video games", November 2017, www.kinephanos.ca

the videogame corpus. A separate study of promotional nomenclature and home video is therefore needed to understand how trailers (as a vernacular) emerging on television, and online converges or diverges from discussions of videogame trailers.

Moving forwards chronologically within the corpus, the earliest direct reference to a videogame trailer found occurs within a discussion of European Football (Soccer) television sponsorship. In 1992, the videogame company Sega used "branded trailers" for the (UK based) ITV broadcast of the European Football Championship.   The product being promoted is unclear within the press commentary, and the "trailer" itself is unavailable for additional study,   so it is perhaps a stretch of logic to conjecture on the aesthetics of the trailer here. That it is a "branded trailer" rather than a "trailer" suggests this is live-action footage of a football match, to promote the Championship, with Sega's logo superimposed over it. It is worth noting that due to the placement on television this form of promotion would also be referred to as a TV spot, or advertising (Personal observations   BFI, 2012). That this is referred to as a trailer suggests yet another anomalous use of the term trailer within the discussion of promotion on television. It would further appear that the example here is atypical as promotes the Sega brand rather than a specific videogame, in this instance Sega. It is suggested that this blurring of forms (TV promotion and game company promotion), may have confused viewers, potentially leading to complaints:

> Research on viewer reaction to sponsorship branding on trailers will be presented next week to ITV programme heads. It is expected to counter concerns that branding on trailers confuses viewers or detracts from the primary aim of trailers to promote a programme. (Syedain, 1992)

No evidence can be found of audience members complaining and this reference in context is interesting in that it demonstrates a partial attempt by industry stakeholders to stabilise, and simultaneously counter the stabilisation of the aesthetic form. It is also interesting to note that this distinction between trailers for products, and trailers for companies is one also made in academic retrospectives of the early film trailer; with work by Hamel (2012) discounting the propaganda film as a trailer for not promoting a single movie (Hamel 2012, 270). Here in Syedain's commentary, just as within Hamel's work we see a policing of the perceived

boundaries between a trailer and an advert – yet with little evidence beyond an implicit understanding of dominant trailer aesthetics. That a deviation from the norm is perceived of as cause for audience concern perfectly illustrates issues of concern regarding promotion being seen as manipulative, and audiences being seen as passive; an issue that plagues much of the discussion of trailers as persuasive (Greene, Johnston, Vollans, 2014).

Following on from the European Championship branding of 1992, within the corpus the next chronological development occurs in 1994. Sega launched its own television channel in 1994 (Silverman, 1994). The channel itself provided opportunity for increased audience interaction and promotional communication, and unsurprisingly it is in this context that trailers reappear within this narrative of the term's use. Here, the commentary on the channel itself offers an insight into the erratic application of the term and the context that surrounded its commutation from cinema to videogaming. Capitalising on earlier branding and existing games, the subscription channel offered gamers the opportunity to interface via television with centrally stored games and play them accordingly (1994). This channel, and the developments leading to it were openly couched in the same terms as those of the film industry, with Silverman opening an article in Variety with a direct industrial comparison between the two: "The videogame business is rapidly becoming the true 800-pound gorilla of the entertainment industry. It's racking up [USD] $6 billion in annual domestic sales, compared with film's $4.8 billion yearly domestic box office take" (Silverman, 1994).

Silverman continues in this vein, reporting on the possibilities of the channel and drawing comparisons between the videogame rental market, itself based on the home video rental market, and the use of the channel to promote new games, noting the benefit to consumers; importantly, the gamers get to take advantage of hyping their wares before they are released, much the way trailers do for movies (Silverman, 1994). Despite the comparisons, these references, like Arnold's in 1989, remain similes rather than the direct application of the term videogame trailer, there is little evidence at this point to suggest trailers for videogames exist in the public domain. The phrasing here suggests a broader culture of convergence in which promotional forms for one industry start feeling like something else. This claim, that videogame trailers don't exist in the mainstream at this point can be reinforced only by a single claim made prior to Silverman.

The first explicit mention of a videogame trailer occurred less than a year prior to Sega launching its channel in 1994, and after the 1992 use of Sega's branded Television content. Such an overlapping history of the term is expected however, and indicates the multifaceted manner in which new nomenclature comes into being and the rate at which it is adopted. What is thought to be the first explicit mention of the videogame trailer phenomenon in the print press appears in 1993: "the $10 million blitz [for the Home videogame release of Mortal Kombat (1993)] features rock-video-style trailers in 1,600 theaters, prime-time television commercials, print ads, promotional giveaways, and a national sweepstakes" (Gruson, 1993).

Here we see a similar distinction to that of the current academic discourse, listing the formats of television commercials and rock-video-style trailers; each being mentioned separately. We see this with commercials being linked to the medium of television, while the trailer is linked to that of cinema; in both these instances the original promotional short eludes review despite exhaustive searches. The prefix of a "rock-video-style" in relation to "trailer" suggests a form of promotion new to the general public or industry. While the prefix here could denote a new form of game trailer, given the context of this press commentary within the corpus it is unlikely. Similarly it could point to an innovative soundtrack, or the adoption of a particular aesthetic associated with music videos at the time. The prefix complicates a reading of the term trailer, suggesting at once a known form, and simultaneously something different. Interestingly, this is indicative of how genres develop; a known format with a twist, reinforcing claims of the trailer as a vernacular genre.

Exploring this within the context of the absent term "trailer" within the press corpus gives evidence to the suggestion that this phrase is being used to frame existing known forms of promotion within a different context. Indeed, this occurs within the history of the book trailer with e-greetings cards being introduced as "a trailer… for a book" (Vollans, 2016). This introduction would fit within the broader promotional context of the release event dubbed "Mortal Monday" in the press, particularly given the propensity for announcing media events as being different from all others in some way – as part of market differentiation. That the marketing campaign surrounding "Mortal Monday" focused on violence and the affective, experiential component of the game evokes a history of audience affect (and negative

implications therein) that stretches back to concerns surrounding the film industry itself. Indeed, a case study of this videogame campaign and its promotional ephemera may highlight this further or refute some of these claims. Interestingly, no other references are found within the corpus around this time. Two years later however, a Consumer Electronics press article (1995), reports that: "Sony Theaters will promote PlayStation videogame with 30-sec. trailer on screen as well as interactive console displays in lobbies -- both plugging "Holiday Sweepstakes," which will award one PlayStation console for each of 75 theaters" (Consumer Electronics, 1995).

It is wholly unclear here what game (if any) is being promoted through this trailer, and indeed the above quote is all that is available within the context of the Nexis database. Given PlayStation's release in the United States during the Winter of 1995, it is likely that this trailer is promoting the console, though the use of a console without a corresponding game is somewhat redundant. Though just one instance, the language here, devoid of any qualification of the kind of trailer being used (such as "rock-video-style") may suggest that by this point the trailer is in the process of becoming a recognisable media form in its own right. This claim is reinforced by the later usage within the corpus by Hettrick (1995). Hettrick makes reference to a $5 rebate for videogames disseminated via "trailers on […] videocassette" but this seems a significant jump from introducing rock-video-style game trailers, to using the term without qualification two years later. It would appear this later instance is reflecting a widespread, or understood terminology, but this could simply be referring to trailers in the "shorts on the shorts reel" sense (Staiger, 1990), in which case the trailers dominating here, are likely those of film or television. The difficulties in gauging the widespread vernacular usage at this time based on limited press references is illustrated here.

Such a jump in the use of the term is indicative of the challenges in trying to map a media form's emergence, yet and it seems likely that this jump (assuming this Hettrick paper is not anomalous in its use of the term) is better tracked through other means than those employed here. It is possible that an unknown factor is at work, such as a promotional campaign excluded from the Nexis archives, the adoption of the term "videogame trailer" within the industry filtering down through press releases, or similar. Within Hettrick and Consumer Electronics' statement however, it is worth noting that the promotion for games or games

consoles are operating within the same space as the film trailer – either on home videocassette or within the theatrical screening space. This in turn, coupled with Gruson's article and the emphasis on promotion in the cinema would suggest that the videogame trailer emerged not out of any aesthetic shift, but rather nomenclature surrounding the space occupied by the promotion itself. That the space should be the dominant factor in referring to trailers is not uncommon when we consider the very beginnings of the film industry.

From 1995 to 1996, the next chronologically occurring reference to a videogame trailer follows this same thematic route regarding shared spaces of cinema, with Wing Commander IV (1996). Making the connection between film and videogame explicit, through the use of shared stars as well as shared space, the press commentary for Wing Commander IV returns to the use of a qualifier surrounding the trailer. While this may indicate a period of negotiation surrounding the accepted nomenclature of the videogame trailer it may also reference the broader concept of the marketing campaign. As Harley Jebens writes:

> The budget for Origin's "Wing Commander IV" computer game was a movie-style one. It cost the Austin-based game developer $10 million to bring the outer-space saga, which stars Mark Hamill, Malcolm McDowell and other Hollywood actors, to fruition.
> The game also is receiving a movie-style advertising campaign. Austin-area General Cinema theaters (that would be the Highland 10 and Great Hills 8) started showing a movie-style trailer Friday for "Wing Commander IV." The game is available for $54.95 (plus tax) at the Highland 10 concession stands, putting the prices we grouse about paying for popcorn and pickles in some kind of perspective. Bon appetit! (Jebens, 1996)

That a "movie-style" promotional campaign was being used here suggests a rationale for framing the promotion as a "trailer" essentially justifying the use of the term "trailer". This promotional campaign ties in with the analysis of Gruson (1993) and the "rock-video-style trailers", in that both forms of promotion here use the same space, and a prefix for their trailers. This suggests the term "trailer" is linked with the promotion of specific games, attempting to ground themselves within the same entertainment context(s) as cinema.

123

_____
Kinephanos, ISSN 1916-985X
"'It's [not just] in the game': the promotional context of video games", November 2017, www.kinephanos.ca

The emergence of the videogame trailer can be bracketed as initially beginning within the 1990s. Though the progressive uptake of the term is impossible to link to a single specific entity based on the research methods employed. Though it can be suggested that term is gradually working into the public conscience at this time, as Variety reports in 1997:

> Slated for March 11, "Independence Day: The Game" will be released on Sega, PlayStation and PC Windows CD-ROM platforms simultaneously, according to Jon Richmond, Fox Interactive prexy [SIC]. Trailers for the game appear on the "Day" homevideo. Fox has also partnered for promotions with Samsung, Planet Hollywood and Orbitz Beverage, along with special offers on pay TV. (Variety, 1997)

Variety's use of the term "trailer" continue using a film and home video context, much like Hettrick's work, but is devoid of any qualifying framing. Coupled with the work of Jebens, this could suggest a point of acceptance of the trailer, that it is acknowledged across different industries and in two overlapping stages; that of trailer with prefix, and that of trailer without prefix. The evidence so far suggests that the decade of the 1990s is crucial to understanding the ways in which the videogame industries positioned themselves as implicitly and sometimes explicitly "cinematic". This positioning of the videogame as "cinematic" is echoed within the work of Hesford (2013), who notes that trailers perform the experience of their products rather than presenting that experience. The sporadic references here however, suggest and hint at a narrative that is complex, but remains largely incomplete through the use of newspaper database research alone. Despite extensive searches, none of these early videogame trailers can be found, and/or verified as that belonging to the press discourse indicated creating a unique avenue for further study, indeed the next logical step of this methodological process is to focus on this chronological period to unpack some of the nested questions overlooked within this paper.

The initial macro dataset suggests significantly more information is available, from the turn of the millennium onwards the frequency of the search results increase significantly, yet micro data was lost beyond that discussed previously. Given the limitations of this approach though, specifically the need for wider supporting studies to provide context to the newspaper

dataset, this paper will be unable to address these limitations fully. This study set out to explore the emergence of the trailer within early games history, and has taken steps to do so, adding valuable contextual information and evidence for the emergence of the form. To continue the historical trajectory, and explore the post-millennial period is vital to continue this debate, however restrictions around access to the dataset, and changes to the Nexis archive prevent progression beyond 1998. Precarity of the early career researcher status in the UK, in terms of access to such databases, and of the methodological limitations outlined means significant revisions to this study are needed in order to fully map an increasingly complex media environment.

Conclusion

Despite the limitations a number of conclusions can be drawn. This paper and its methodology identified a series of distinct areas for future study, and has generated significantly more questions than can be answered. In terms of studying the videogame trailer, there is a need to understand the connotations of the terms "advertising", "commercials" and "trailers" particularly given their early trajectory in this area as pertaining to different forms of aesthetics. Owing to the links highlighted between television and trailers further work into "promos", and "Spots" from an aesthetic, vernacular and industrial perspective is needed.

Further, the dearth of literature in this area is highlighted through the reliance on work taken from film studies, particularly as such work is itself contested within that sphere. Within the literature and study of the video game trailer there is an identified need to couch terms like "trailer" and "advertising" within explicit discourse trajectories in order to fully explore videogame promotional ephemera without bias. That the previous literature in this area has been working with competing, often overlapping terms demonstrates a need to fully understand the implications of terminology for future study. It may be necessary then, to place videogame trailers within the hypernym of "advertising", using the term "trailer" to invoke or interrogate a history of the cinematic, and/or reflecting audience nomenclature. Indeed, the press corpus cannot account for negotiated or oppositional readings of the term "trailer" and perhaps applies too much value to press commentators.

While exploratory in nature, this paper has managed to sketch out a brief history of the trailer as it emerged as a vernacular category, identifying at least two broad sections: trailer as a simile, and trailers as a category of promotion. There is evidence to suggest that as the videogame industry moved away from the realm of the television, it used "trailers" as a way of positioning the possibilities of new media and media content in the language and aesthetics of the cinema. Perhaps this should be seen as a way of moving away from images of family entertainment as children marketed in the 1980s grew up. There is also the consideration of industrial personnel, and the development of advertising agencies branching out across industries.

Limited by the dataset, the references found throughout the press corpus point to a transition into cinema occurring at the same time as the use of the term "trailer"; it is however unclear if this is a causal link. Rather than a progressive movement in the application of the label "trailer", the data suggests a complex but rapid transition in which videogame trailers emerged from a conceptual object, as a simile, to a readily applied, if not necessarily accepted form of promotion within the space of the cinema. It is unclear if the term "trailer" is applied by journalists independently of press release framing, however, and the driving factor in applying this term is unclear. Secondly, there is a genuine need to explore early videogame adverts and trailer aesthetics: this paper has discussed the vernacular genre but a historical study of games promotional aesthetics is needed. One idealised way of doing so is collating each trailer/advert on a timeline and analysing the aesthetic in relation to both the individual campaign (does this campaign use an advertising aesthetic or a trailer aesthetic) and to place this within a broader industrial and social history. Exploring the aesthetic form may help to determine if the linguistic divide is reflective of the aesthetic experience. However, in each case, there is evidence to suggest a retrospective analysis of audience vernacular is needed in order to understand how accepted the terms "advertising" and "trailer" are. This paper is therefore, an initial foray into the field, and one that may help advance this area. It is hoped that in the future, the methods set out in this paper may be replicated with different, and more complete results.

References

ARNOLD, G. (1989), "Washington Weekend; movies; movie mini-reviews", *The Washington Times* December 28. Nexis Database.

BFI (2013), "Art of TV Promotion in the Digital Age", *BFI Conference* event, London, July 4-5.

BROOKEY, R.A., & BOOTH, P. (2006), "Restricted Play Synergy and the Limits of Interactivity in The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King Video Game", *Games and Culture* Vol. 1, No. 3, p214-230.

CASSIDY, S. B., (2011), "The Videogame as Narrative", *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, Vol. 28, No. 4, p292-306.

CHAMBERS, D. (2012), "Wii play as a family": the rise in family-centred video gaming. *Leisure Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 1, p. 69-82.

CONSUMER ELECTRONICS., [No Author] (1995), *NOTEBOOKS* December 4. Pg 14. Warren Publishing Inc.

CRYSTAL, D. (2004), *Language and the Internet*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

DAVILA, D. (2010), "Not so Innocent: Book Trailers as Promotional Text and Anticipatory Stories", *The ALAN Review* Vol. 38, No.1, p32–42.

FLYNN, B. (2003), "Geography of the Digital Hearth", *Information, Communication & Society*, Vol. 6, No. 4, p551-576.

GENETTE, G. (1982), *Palimpsestes: La littérature au second degré, Paris, Seuil*.

_____ (1987), *Paratexts: thresholds of interpretation*, [Trans. Jane E Lewin 1997] Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

GRAY, J. (2010), *Show Sold Separately, Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*, New York: New York University Press.

GREENE, F., JOHNSTON, K.M., & VOLLANS, E. (2014), "Would I lie to you? Researching audience attitudes to, and uses of, the promotional trailer format", *Journal of Media and Cultural Politics* Vol. 10, No. 1, p109-116.

GRUSON, L. (1993), "Video Violence: It's Hot! It's Mortal! It's Kombat!; Teen-Agers Eagerly Await Electronic Carnage While Adults Debate Message Being Sent", September 16. *The New York Times*, p.1. New York.

HAMEL, K. J. (2012), "From Advertisement to Entertainment: Early Hollywood Film Trailers", *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, Vol. 29, No. 3, p268–278.

HARDING-ROLL, P. (2016), "Call of Duty trailer is one of YouTube's most disliked", *BBC News,* 10 May. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-36257147> [Accessed 1/12/16]

HEATH, S. (1977), "Screen Image, Film Memory", *Cinetracts*, Vol. 1, No.1.

HESFORD, D. (2013), " 'Action … Suspense … Emotion!': The Trailer as Cinematic Performance", *Frames Cinema Journal*, Issue. 3 (May).

HETTRICK, S. (1995), " 'Mighty' Rides 'Pagemaster' Coattails", *Hollywood Reporter* February 10.

JANUSZCZAK, W. (1993), "Defending a Critical Freedom", *The Sunday Times*: London, UK, October 31.

JEBENS, H. (1996), "Powerhouse Hardware Software; Exploring all things high-tech in the world of entertainment", *Austin American-Statesman* (Texas), XL Ent; Pg. 23. February 29.

128

_____
Kinephanos, ISSN 1916-985X
"'It's [not just] in the game': the promotional context of video games", November 2017, www.kinephanos.ca

JOHNSTON, K.M. (2008), " 'The Coolest Way to Watch Movie Trailers in the World': Trailers in the Digital Age", *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, Vol. 14, No. 2, p145–160.

_____ (2009), *Coming Soon*. Jefferson, North Carolina: Macfarlane.

VOLLANS, E., & GREENE, F. (2016), "Watching the trailer: Researching the film trailer audience", *Participations*, Vol. 13, No. 2, <http://www.participations.org/Volume%_2013/Issue%202/5.pdf> [Accessed 11/9/17]

KEMPLEY, R. (1989), "The Wizard", *The Washington Post* December 15.

KERNAN, L., (2004), *Coming Attractions*, University of Texas Press, Austin TX.

LEWIS, H. T., (1933), *The Motion Picture Industry*, New York: D. Van Nostrand Company Inc.

ONTARIO REG 452/05., *Legal Definition of Trailers* Canadian Law, Ontario. <https://www.ontario.ca/laws/regulation/050452> [Accessed 11/9/17]

PADGETT, D., & ALLEN, D. (1997), "Communicating Experiences: A Narrative Approach to Creating Service Brand Image", *Journal of Advertising*, Vol. 26, No.4, p49-62.

SILVERMAN, R., (1994), "Sega channels TV vidgames", *Variety* – Television. P.17. July 24.

STAIGER, J. (1990), "Announcing Wares, Winning Patrons, Voicing Ideals: Thinking about the History and Theory of Film Advertising", *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 29, No. 3, p3 – 31.

SYEDAIN, H., (1992), "Advertising/Media: ITV look set to allow branding on trailers – Sponsorship", *Variety* 'Marketing', May 14.

VARIETY (1997), "FOX PLANS VIDEO 'INDEPENDENCE'", *Daily Variety*, February 19, Wednesday, NEWS; Pg. 26.

VOIGT, K. (2013), "Becoming Trivial: The Book Trailer", *Culture Unbound: Journal of Current Cultural Research*, Vol. 5, p671–689.

VOLLANS, E. (2015), "So Just what is a trailer anyway", *Arts and the Market* Vol. 5, No. 2, p112-125.

_____ (2016) "Think of it as a trailer… for a book", *Publications*, Vol. 4, No. 32.

WOLF, M. J. P. (2008), *The Video Game Explosion A history from to PlayStation and Beyond*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press.

YOUNG, B. M. (2007), "The Disappearance and Reappearance and Disappearance of the Player in Videogame Advertising", Presented at *Situated Play DiGRA 2007 Conference*. The University of Tokyo, September, 2007

ZANGER, A. (1998), "Next on your screen: The double identity of the trailer", *Semiotica*, Vol. 1 No. 2, p207–230.

Dr Ed Vollans received his PhD Cross Media Promotion: The Entertainment Industries and The Trailer in 2015 from the University of East Anglia. He is a member of the Creative Industries Federation, and the Royal Society of the Arts. With colleagues at the UEA and UCLA he launched the international audience studies project Watching the Trailer <www.watchingthetrailer.com> and has since worked in a number of roles across the UK Higher Education sector, most recently as a Lecturer at Bournemouth University. His research focuses on the promotional trailer in its many forms.

130

_____
Kinephanos, ISSN 1916-985X
"'It's [not just] in the game': the promotional context of video games", November 2017, www.kinephanos.ca