

Fictional Games as Parody
Analysing the Fictional Game of Box Peek
as Parody of the Animated Series of
Transmedial Gaming Franchises

Rory Summerley

Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture
Volume 16, issue 1 (Fictional Games), pp. 81–97

Fictional Games as Parody

Analysing the Fictional Game of Box Peek as Parody of the Animated Series of Transmedial Gaming Franchises

RORY SUMMERLEY

Abstract

This paper conducts a textual analysis of the animated comedic web miniseries *Box Peek*, analysing it as a general parody of transmedial gaming franchises, particularly the *Pokémon* TV series. The show features the fictional game of Box Peek, which is used as a device to not only provide drama and motivation for the show's characters, but also to parody the games and associated conceits that are central to these franchises, often for the sake of humour. This discussion makes use of theories of fiction and parody, cultural analyses of *Pokémon* and children's media, as well as *Box Peek's* creator's own commentary to understand how fictional[ised] games create meaning for an audience. It concludes having discussed two major threads of analysis. The first concerning the rules of the game, which implies questions of strategy and technology, which eventually concerns fictional world-building, exploiting the fictional and ludic inconsistencies that exist in transmedial game franchises for humour. The second is the way in which *Box Peek*, after formally parodying shows like *Pokémon*, then extends this parody by answering the questions it raises. In so doing it is argued that *Box Peek* is simultaneously imitating the childlike tone of *Pokémon* before progressing to a more reflective, adult perspective on the enjoyment of these series by the audience themselves. This leads the (presumed millennial) audience to a retrospective self-assessment of how, now in adulthood, they regard transmedial gaming franchises of their childhood in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Keywords

Parody; *Pokémon*; Fictional Game; *Box Peek*; Game Adaptation; Transmedia

In 2018, the crowd-funded games journalism collective EasyAllies released the first episode of the 10-episode web miniseries *Box Peek*¹ (Bosman, 2018–2019) on YouTube, created by then EasyAllies member Kyle Bosman. The show follows a young boy, Jordy Defective, as he travels to a new city and learns about the highly popular game Box Peek from his new friend C. D. Romanasello. The show's production was carried out primarily by Bosman with assistance only for voice acting and occasional script feedback from other members of the EasyAllies, as well as some voice actors outside of the group. The show uses a unique form of paper puppet animation to meet the limitations of a small crowdfunding budget via the EasyAllies' Patreon and YouTube community.

The present article will analyse Box Peek as a fictional game, with a particular focus on its nature as a parody of fictionalisations of popular game franchises such as *Pokémon* or *Yu-Gi-Oh!*. To do this, it will initially present an overview of existing theory on parody, fiction, and fictional games before engaging with textual analysis of *Box Peek* itself and the cultural impact of the texts it parodies. Finally, I will outline the conclusions of what the analysis reveals about fictional games that function as parodies and what they say about their targets.

Box Peek is an example of a “fictional game”. Gualeni and Fassone (2023) have previously worked to define and discuss fictional games broadly, understanding fictional games “to be a game by virtue of [their] being literally understood as a game or a sport by the characters inhabiting a fictional world — and thus being potentially available for them to play” (p. 5). Though this definition keeps the discussion open to a wide range of case studies, I would add that ‘fictional games’ can also refer to real games that are fictionalised by process of adaptation, some of which are discussed below. Although Box Peek is not played and is impractical to play for real players, its similarities to fictionalised adaptations of games like *Pokémon* or *Yu-Gi-Oh!* will be discussed. This latter aspect of fictional games is highlighted by Gualeni and Fassone, namely that they can be “tools for meta-reflexivity” regarding the real world that extend beyond simply aids for fleshing out an imagined fictional world (p. 6).

Fictionally, Box Peek is a game that maintains the excited focus of all members and institutions of society with many of the show's characters only interested in discussing or playing Box Peek. Although the show *Box Peek* is not uniquely popular in terms of views or widespread cultural impact, it is a unique case study for being a series (as opposed to a skit, gag, or one-off episode) about a fictional game that formally parodies other fictionalised serial adaptations of games, such as *Pokémon the Series*—the cultural impact of the latter being undeniable and which Box Peek seeks to

¹ *Box Peek* the show will be referred to in italics from this point on to distinguish it from Box Peek the fictional game.

interrogate. The show can be read as a parody of similar shows that were part of large transmedial gaming franchises aimed at millennial children in the late 1990s and early 2000s that tie-in with a real-life gaming product and extended media franchise. Sports, hobbies, and other competitive interests make up entire genres and subgenres of manga and, by extension, anime, such as those exported around this time (Bryce and Davis, 2010, p. 48). Although many are based on sports, there is the subgenre of adventure *shōnen* stories that focus on a pre-existing game or toy, fictionalised inside of a fantasy world.

Episodes in these shows tend to focus on the activity of training, learning about and playing a game or similar activity for the purpose of building interest in the real game or toy products associated with the franchise. Examples include *Pokémon the Series*, *Yu-Gi-Oh!*, *Beyblade*, *Digimon*, *Medabots*, or *Monster Rancher*. *Box Peek*, however, stands alone with no supporting game to promote, and thus, it is argued here, that it acts to parody these source texts for the sake of comedy and reflection on what they mean for their ageing millennial audiences.

Literature review and method

Some have noted parody's reflexive power to look back on what has come before and reinterpret the meanings of its referents in a new context or period, thus giving it a double character: that of the original and that of the parody (Greene et al., 2012). Parody has been variously defined by many academics, with a commonly recurring element being the formal emulation of a source text, or target, but with key differences that aim to reframe that text and create a new parodic text (Archer, 2016, p.148; Dentith, 2000, p. 157; Gehring, 1999, p. 198; Genette, 1997, p. 12; Gray, 2012; Harries, 2000; Hutcheon, 2000, p. 22). This is done usually for the purposes of comedy, or to provide the audience with a "pop culture literacy experience" (Gehring, 1999, pp.199–198) but parody can also function to critique or reframe the source text (or a political issue as in satire) (Hutcheon, 2000, p. 62). In this way, parody can be usefully put to work to critically analyse the past and nostalgic attitudes towards it, as well as revisit cultural monoliths to interrogate them. It is also important to remember that the parodied text(s) aren't necessarily the one(s) under attack. As Hutcheon (2000) states: "It is often respected and used as a model" (p. 103) and that parody can be formally summarised as "repetition [of a source text] with a difference" (p. 107), a key definition for this paper's analysis.

However it is defined, the question arises: what type of parody is a given text? Parody is not a monolith, and one could follow the format of a source text very closely or use it to mock a completely different target (Hutcheon, 2000, p. 58). It can be critical, playful, satirical, an exercise in media literacy, or a mixture of all (Gray, 2012; Hutcheon, 2000). In the present case study of *Box Peek*, it will be argued that it is a general parody, in Dentith's (2000) sense, that it has no one target text (p. 7), rather the target is the genre of animated series based on transmedial game franchises.

Box Peek works well as this type of parody since it is also interrogating what Armbruster (2016) might term a “collective” or “cultural” memory of its target texts, such that even if one does not have direct experience of these texts, they may have osmosed them through shared cultural influence. This osmosis is even more likely owing to their transmedial nature, such as Pokémon fans variably beginning with the show then the game and vice versa (Assunção et al., 2017).

Parody as a form of humour is also often linked to games and play (Rutter Giappone et al., 2022). Some case studies discuss games being parodied generally elsewhere, such as Zarzycka’s (2022) readings of various YouTube series (e.g., *Epic NPC Man*) that parody general premises of games and their mechanics as compared to reality. Others concern games that are parodies of games, such as Möring’s (2022) discussion of *Tetris* parodies. Yet more discuss cases where fictional games are created as pranks (Saarikoski et al., 2022) or constitute playable parodies of real games (Summerley, 2022). Gualeni and Fassone (2023) have even highlighted the use of fictional games for various purposes, specifically highlighting three examples of their meta-referential functions: reflection on their instrumental use to improve humanity, e.g. exercise, therapy, or training; to anticipate trends in society and technology that use games in the traditional vein of science fiction; and, naturally enough, their potential to satirise ‘how actual games are made, played, used and shared socially’ (pp.174–178).

The examples provided by Gualeni and Fassone (2023) and in Rutter-Giappone et al. (2022) either constitute pranks, or one-off gags and skits, that target specific or general texts (fictional games found in scenes from *The Simpsons*; others mentioned above), or are more extensive parodies of game development and the problems and stresses it can cause (e.g., ‘Wirrâl Untethered’ in *Disco Elysium*; the TV show *Mythic Quest*). So far, the literature has not extensively discussed longform serial parodies of fictionalised game adaptations via a fictional game. *Box Peek* is a unique case study of such a fictional game as it is a parody that closely aligns to the formal devices, worldbuilding goals, and personal memories of specific transmedial game projects like Pokémon or *Yu-Gi-Oh!*. Gualeni and Fassone correctly observe:

Even when a fictional game does not explicitly reference an existing game, its very existence within a fictional world invites appreciators to reflect upon the games they play in their everyday lives and on the various roles and forms that play adopts in the actual world. (p. 178)

Given the continuing influence and dominance of *Box Peek*’s targets amongst adults and children alike, it seems a useful case study for analysis of the broader culture they impact.

Although *Box Peek* is a general parody, for the sake of limiting examples to a useful anchor, specific aspects of *Box Peek* will be framed through the television show *Pokémon the Series* (Yuyama, 1998-2006)² and its respective franchise (though others may be briefly mentioned to demonstrate particular points). Again, it should be noted that while many parodies of Pokémon do exist, almost all of these are one-off episodes, jokes, or skits lampooning the gameplay and premise of Pokémon, e.g. “Chin-pokomon” in *South Park* (Parker and Stough, 1999) or “Peekimon Get” in *The Simpsons* (Omine and Polcino, 2017). Again, *Box Peek* is a unique example of parody in this space in that it is a serial episodic show that formally parodies other serial shows that fictionalise a game and explores the ludic, narrative, and metafictional questions such a longform project must deal with through worldbuilding.

Pokémon promotes the Pokémon video games and collectible card games, however it fictionalises the games with the goal of transmedial promotion of the franchise. In the series, a young boy, Ash Ketchum, sets out on an adventure with his friends to become a Pokémon trainer, learning about Pokémon and how to train and battle them in the process. In adapting their core game products to fictional versions of such, *Pokémon* arguably struggles to make the internal rules of the game consistent with the extended fiction of the franchise as it progressively represents a concrete fictional universe.

Likewise, the representation of many aspects of the world of *Pokémon* suggest or imply various questions that its worldbuilding does not really address, such as the coexistence of Pokémon and other real-world flora and fauna, or the technology required to capture and store Pokémon in the form of energy. In *Pokémon*, the Pokémon themselves and the complex technologies that facilitate their capture and battling must be grounded, to an extent, in the framework of a long-form narrative series and must confront some of the abstractions the game source texts negotiate differently. It should also be noted that this study is limited from a cultural standpoint of interpreting *Pokémon the Series* (originally a Japanese media product exported to the West) as the target of *Box Peek*'s parody (the product of American/Western millennial creators and consumers).

Parody is linked to the logic of late capitalism and postmodernism, which coincides appropriately with the target texts of *Box Peek* (Dentith, 2000, p. 155; Hutcheon, 2000, p. xiv). *Pokémon* has, over the last three decades, been repeatedly criticised, or at least examined, through the lenses of power, capitalism, and consumerism and the implied effects on a child audience (Allison, 2006; Bainbridge, 2014; Elza, 2009, p. 63; Gibson, 2002; Heckman, 2019). Jordan (2004) summarises it as a “globally obsessive brand for children” (p. 462) and although Pokémon (and similar franchises)

² Hereafter the TV series is referred to in italics (i.e. *Pokémon*) as opposed to the games, larger franchise, and Pokémon themselves

are ripe for critical parody along these lines, *Box Peek* takes several routes into parody that adopt both a more complex reflexive stance from its millennial creators and the formal device of a fictional game to foreground this discussion. Although there is no representative data of the audience demographics of *Box Peek*, the show was made and released between 2018–2019, approximately 20 years after *Pokémon* first released in the West in 1998, when many players would be around a target age of 13 or younger, i.e. millennials. Though viewers do not necessarily need to be familiar with the target text of a parody to enjoy it, for those that recognise the link it provides potentially deeper interpretation with this experience in mind.

It should be noted that the reader of a parody should always take responsibility for such assessments as the interpretation of parody is “one half of the process” (Hutcheon, 2000, p. 22), but specific instances will be used to argue this perspective. Thus, this paper seeks to conduct a textual analysis of *Box Peek* with the focus of reading it as a work of formal parody from the perspective of a millennial audience familiar with *Pokémon*. It will analyse not only the common tropes and formal conventions of its target texts but examine how the design of the game *Box Peek* is intimately related to its approach to parody. Two research questions arise:

RQ1: How does the fictional game of *Box Peek* parody large transmedial game franchises that fictionalise their own games?

RQ2: What messages are present through this approach to parody?

How to play *Box Peek*

The lead character of *Box Peek*, Jordy Defective, is a clear audience surrogate in the same way many shows of the same genre follow a hero new to the game or just starting on an adventure. Jordy comes from Fairboat Island, a place where *Box Peek* is not played or known about. These lead characters are usually shown to be either learning about the game (and its attendant world) with great determination, genius savants with great talent, or both. *Box Peek*'s rules are explained to us through Jordy's friend C. D. trying to improve Jordy's complete lack of knowledge.

In *Box Peek*, players can summon a box in which they sit inside during play and can peek out of at their opponent's box. There are two ways to win *Box Peek*: peeking at an opponent's box for 4 seconds (a complete peek) or catching an opponent peeking (a counter-peek). In addition to this there are 3 core rules:

1. If a player peeks, they must peek for at least 2 seconds
2. If a player retreats from a peek they must wait 6 seconds before peeking again
3. A player can put anything in their box that fits in their box

In a parallel Q&A series about the show, creator Kyle Bosman explains that the rules were engineered as a means of providing drama and suspense: "Rules came from necessity, like how you add drama around that ... The idea of somebody peeking and there being suspense of the person's peeking and that's why [to win] you have to peek for at least 4 seconds" (Easy Allies Plays, 2018, 32:26). He goes on to explain the three core rules are there to make it so that the game has sporting conditions and can't simply be gamed by players peeking and retreating very quickly. Rules 1 and 2 ensure that characters, especially Jordy, are put in positions of vulnerability and suspense at what might happen during the time of an attempted peek. Meanwhile rule 3 allows for variety later in the show, since the game has little depth otherwise. The rules by themselves do not constitute a very playable game and this is humorously incongruent with most character's devotional love of the game.

Like other fictional games, such as 'Azad' in *The Player of Games* (Banks, 2003) or 'Gungi' in *Hunter X Hunter* (Togashi, 2005), the full rules and history of the game's development are kept vague so that the focus can remain on storytelling, avoiding the distraction of ironing out complex inconsistencies or edge case rules. Bosman had even considered the real-life playability of the game when creating the series:

I don't think this game is possible in real life ... I don't think it'd be fun in real life ... It's not meant to be a fun game to play ... The absurdity is that everyone loves this game so much, it's the most popular game in the world. (Easy Allies Plays, 2018, 34:53)

Two major threads are discussed in this paper. First regards the naturally absurd nature of the content of *Box Peek* raising several questions, fictionally asked by its characters as well as ones left to the audience, often for the sake of comedy. In this manner it echoes the questions that the content of series like *Pokémon* sometimes fails to address. Second, is the reconciling of the love of *Box Peek* with external contexts, something *Pokémon* and other series' ageing, millennial audiences also grapple with in terms of how they relate to and understand it as fans of the real games.

Silly questions about Box Peek: Rules, technology, and consistency

So *Box Peek's* world is comedic right? I just wanted to explore the world of a Beyblade or *Yu-Gi-Oh!* where everyone loves a stupid game. But what's fun about that to me is that everyone's not crazy, right? It's not like a bunch of crazy people who are shallow. It is really considering how and why everyone in this world, only loves this thing... Like how everyone in the world of *Pokémon* loves *Pokémon* and it's like 'why don't you love other things' you know? (Kyle Bosman, creator of *Box Peek*, in Easy Allies Play, 2018, 56:41)

Jordy himself, shortly after learning the game, asks the reasonable question: “What happens if nobody peeks?” (Easy Allies, 2018a, 7:01), to which the absurd dismissal from his new friend, and Box Peek expert, C.D. is “Jordy, you have the craziest questions, that has literally never happened!”. However, these questions can also be leveraged at many other fictional games that either do not explore edge cases, where real-life competitive games and sports must account for rulings on very niche occurrences within a game, or suggest strategies that cannot be fully imagined unless the fiction they are a part of chooses to depict them. To do this the game design of Box Peek is deliberately absurd in a way that is incongruous with how beloved it is. A match of Box Peek almost never lasts more than a single minute and frequently lasts shorter than 10 seconds. The potential depth of the game is extremely limited and the basic strategies, as they are enacted on the show, would be exhausted over a relatively small number of play sessions. In short, it would not sustain a stable metagame for very long. While this would be a flaw in most other media, it is a strength of *Box Peek* as a work of comedic parody.

The game’s rules and their implications about the world and the technology used to play it are also a source of much of the series’ jokes, but also a parodic mechanism for imitating its source texts. Because of the peeking rule’s requirement of precise counting of specific units of times (2, 4, and 6 second increments exactly), Box Peek requires referees that can measure time by milliseconds to resolve disputes. Coupled with the fact that players can challenge each other to a match at almost any time and in any location, the world of *Box Peek* features flying, near-sentient, robotic drones that can talk and think, that work as game referees (known as ‘Peek Refs’). This technology is extremely impressive and initially causes Jordy to be more interested in the robotic Peek Ref than playing Box Peek:

Jordy: You have floating robots here!?

C. D.: Just for Box Peek (Easy Allies, 2018a, 3:38)

The extremely complex technology that powers these robots even becomes a major focus of episodes 6 and 9, which, respectively, introduce the issue of black markets for Box Peek technology, and explore the self-awareness of the Peek Refs.

The boxes used to play Box Peek are remotely stored in a special storage warehouse (“the basement fortress”) from which the boxes can be teleported to their user’s current location via a “boxporter”. Like the referees, this incredible technology is not used for any purpose other than playing Box Peek. Even the boxes themselves are incredible technology as they are indestructible, being made of “double plastic”. In episode 5, a character ominously explains to Jordy that “[the] boxes are complicated volatile mechanisms, in truth we barely understand how they work” (Easy Allies, 2018b, 4:42). Thus, the world is suggested to be so wholly consumed by Box Peek that its most cutting-edge technology (robots, space-age materials, teleportation)

work in service of a game as opposed to other applications never explored in the fiction e.g., healthcare, transportation, military, housing, communications, etc.

These forms of technology are analogous to *Pokémon's* Pokéballs and PC storage devices, which can convert Pokémon into energy, which can be sent or recalled in the same way a digital file might be. This reductive and subordinate commodification of the Pokémon themselves is a criticism often levelled at the series (Allison, 2006, p. 220). The Pokéballs can also store Pokémon many times the size of a Pokéball using this method. Similar examples exist in other media where the central game-playing technology raises further questions about its implications for the rest of the fictional world. For example, *Yu-Gi-Oh!* features gigantic platforms capable of generating complex holograms in real-time so that a card game may be played. The applications of these technologies to non-games contexts are not fully explored, such that it can seem absurd, which *Box Peek* exploits for humour.

Naturally, fictional media aimed at younger viewers are not always working to flesh out their fictional worlds in great or realistic detail, let alone resolve major fictional inconsistencies. Walton's (1990) concept of "silly questions" (pp.174-175) has some currency here to help account for the fact that fictional world building involves answering these types of questions up to a point of acceptability. Walton gives examples of representational fictions where conceits of the fiction mean that unrealistic things may happen. For example, Shakespearean characters, of any background or eloquence, speaking with great poetic ability, or Leonardo's Last Supper having all its participants lined up on one side of the table (for the sake of the viewer) rather than around it (as a group naturally would). Walton points out that silly questions that highlight these conceits of the medium have no place in serious critique. One must consider whether the aesthetic impact of the work is seriously called into question by such "silly questions".

Silly questions arguably gain value by being integrated into parody rather than mere pedantic critique. Bosman even highlights a question originating from comedic improv that guided the initial concept for *Box Peek*: "If this then what?" (Easy Allies Plays, 2018, 1:00:04); if Pokéballs exist then what else happens? In a parody these questions are raised and answered whenever it is appropriately dramatic or humorous to do so and often in cases where its source texts simply do not. Jordy's innocent curiosity about the rules and origins of *Box Peek* and its accompanying technologies are similarly treated as silly questions. In doing so the questions become a rich source of humour as every other character in the show sincerely ignores these questions due to their love of *Box Peek*, much like we, the audience, might do when enjoying *Pokémon* or similar texts. Thus, silly questions are valuable currency for parody.

Fictional games also offer the extended possibility to interrogate questions of ludic (in)consistency, given that shows like *Pokémon* aim to fictionalise real games with concrete and objective rulesets. In the *Pokémon* games, different Pokémon possess

elemental affinities, which work as counters to each other in a manner akin to rock-paper-scissors (Water beats Fire beats Grass beats Water etc.). In the *Pokémon* episode *Showdown in Pewter City* (Takegami and Itani, 1998; Yuyama, 1998-2006), Ash arrives at a gym where the gym leader Brock primarily uses rock and ground type Pokémon. Ash defeats Brock's Geodude (rock/ground type) with his Pikachu's (electric type) attacks, despite ground-type Pokémon being immune to electric-type attacks in the games. There are other, myriad inconsistencies, which can make the transmedial experience of Pokémon incongruent. Some Pokémon can use moves in the show, which they cannot learn in the games, and vice versa. In many cases these problems arise from the fact that the different media will make use of different storytelling/representational conveniences that are either appropriate to game balance or drama. Despite these problems, Pokémon fights are otherwise narratively satisfying in the absence of a defined rules list.

If the *Pokémon* franchise is silly because of ludic inconsistencies in the rules of Pokémon across its transmedia portfolio, *Box Peek*, by contrast, is silly because it is ludicrously *consistent*, that is, its rules are consistent but reveal the game as inherently ludicrous. Rule 3 (a player can put anything in their box that fits in their box) pushes the acceptability of the game and gets exploited by *Box Peek* players to absurd degrees, mainly for the sake of narrative variety in an otherwise simplistic game. In episode 5, Jordy learns about box mods, different attachments and gadgets that can be used to disrupt the game. Mods include robotic arms to hold the opponent's box lid shut or shining an intensely bright light at the opponent, preventing the opponent from peeking. Players often have no way of countering them and box mods are usually extremely expensive, framing them as an economic disadvantage. This could be read as a commentary on "pay-to-win" elements of, and the intense consumer demand for, popular non-digital games such as *Magic the Gathering* or indeed the *Pokémon Trading Card Game* (Brougère, 2004); something Maisenhölder (2018) argues the game balance of which are "corrupted" by "game-external capital" for "game-internal" chances to win. Although any mod that fits in a box is legal, many push the limits of acceptable sporting behaviour. Thus, the spirit of the rules, not their ludic consistency, is called into question for humorous effect.

Putting away childish things: Parody for the youth who became adults

Box Peek incidentally parodies elements of *shōnen* manga and anime, a Japanese media classification used to identify media primarily aimed at young boys (Bryce and Davis, 2010; Drummond-Mathews, 2010). It is a loose genre which the targets of *Box Peek* fall into and a type of show Bosman themselves has acknowledged as an influence and inspiration (Easy Allies Plays, 2018). Drummond-Mathews (2010) summarises the themes of *shōnen* manga contemporary to the 1990s (when Pokémon and other transmedial game franchises launched) as being characterised by "concepts

of friendship, perseverance, and success". Furthermore, these narratives, although fitting the broad outline of Joseph Campbell's "hero's journey", are distinguished by a hero that spends much of their time in the "initiation phase", learning, growing, failing, and ultimately changing before overcoming their struggles towards the end of a narrative (Drummon-Mathews, 2010, p. 73). This also happens in *Box Peek*, but subversive elements in the latter half of the show reframe these tropes in ways that relate more to the real world of the ageing millennials that are, and were, the target of such franchises.

In *Pokémon*, the lead protagonist, Ash Ketchum, is shown to be a plucky but inexperienced Pokémon trainer, similar to Jordy learning about Box Peek. They are both supported by a cast of friends, as well as campy villains, that round out the relationships they explore through the game as a motivational device (Bainbridge, 2014; Jordan, 2004, p. 469). As they progress, Ash and Jordy learn about their respective game's strategies along the way. In Ash's case he even fails and loses important matches from time to time, which is where *Box Peek* differs again. Jordy demonstrates a freakishly good record playing Box Peek since he never loses a single match, somehow managing to devise a winning strategy in every situation, even when he has only recently learnt of a new rule or element of the game. It is later revealed to the audience, in episode 8 that his success and destiny as a champion is due to a mixture of luck and talent, but also shadowy manipulation of Jordy and his adventure by the Box Peek Organisation (BPO), at one point comically designating him a "mythical, chosen peeker" (Easy Allies, 2018c, 5:03). As established earlier, Jordy's home, Fairboat Island, is the last region unfamiliar with Box Peek and so engineering a champion from Fairboat is a profit-driven, corporate ploy to ensure the remainder of the world is caught up by a global gaming phenomenon in an eerily comparable manner to *Pokémon* in our own world.

Although *Box Peek* is only ten episodes long, its initial release schedule split it into two 'seasons' of five episodes each, released in 2018 and 2019 respectively (Internet Movie Database, n.d.). The second season shifts its focus more frequently to the behind the scenes of Box Peek and features a more tragic tone, less frequently showing Jordy's matches (or almost any Box Peek matches) on screen, instead humorously describing them later in end-of-episode conversation. Thus, the game itself recedes into the background in favour of exploring the cultural and political motivations of people and organisations who are involved in Box Peek. This mid-series perspective reframe can be thought of as the other, 'adult' side of *Box Peek*.

In this way, the first five episodes can be seen as more *formal* parody of *Pokémon*, following a small cast of minors learning about and playing a game in the form of a serial adventure. The last five are much more of an *extended* parody that presents a more subversive, adult side of the world and consequences of the existence of Box Peek that is much darker in tone. The events less formally resemble a given episode of *Pokémon* and are more like *extended* worldbuilding that naturally arise from the questions mentioned earlier. Both seasons have these formal and extended parodic

elements, but the series can be seen as a parody with the goal of replicating the childlike experience of a show like *Pokémon* before pivoting, in its latter episodes, to a deeper exploration of the more adult questions and implications of the existence of its central game activity. The child and adult perspectives and their respective formal and extended parodic elements can further be seen as an appeal for the target demographic of *Box Peek*, namely ageing millennials who grew up on the shows it imitates.

Throughout the show there is a mostly uncritical acceptance of Box Peek as naturally the most fun thing anyone could do, until the final episode, where the depth and interest in Box Peek has been fully explored, not only by Jordy but also by the show itself. In episode 10, Jordy has become such a celebrated player that he is finally invited to an exhibition match against the current world champion, which is broadcast worldwide. In typical fashion, he defeats the champion by countering their strategy. The champion, Takia Chill, has a magical mind-reading dragon that can tell what the opponent is intending to do, but Jordy defeats this strategy by somehow not demonstrating any will or intent and simply counter-peeking Takia in her panic. Jordy is crowned the champion.

The *shōnen* protagonist's arc is spent primarily learning and growing through an extended initiation in the world, "often the entire series" after which they will have "grown, matured, and learned something that not only enriches herself but also the world around her" (Drummond-Mathews, 2010, p. 73). Jordy has certainly done this, but his apparent mastery of Box Peek leads him to an anti-climax. Jordan (2004) has noted that the Pokémon games promise the possibility of "mastery and acquisition" whilst also making sure these end goals are forever denied keeping players hooked, and so Jordy's attainment of mastery comes as a major blow (p. 468). In his post-match interview, although he has no ill will toward Box Peek, he ultimately considers the game "kinda stupid", in front of a worldwide audience: "I don't wanna do it any more... I'm sorry...If you all wanna keep playing Box Peek, that's cool! ... It's just not for me" (Easy Allies, 2018d, 6:41). With that, Jordy retires from playing it forever. Everyone who had become so invested in Jordy and the game (emotionally or financially) is shown to reap the bittersweet end of their friendships with Jordy, their careers, and, in some cases, their own lives. What is to be made of this apparent rejection of a game everyone's world revolved around?

An adult millennial audience must now consider what Hutcheon (2000) refers to as the 'text's situation in the world' (p. 103). Jordy has changed and 'grown up', leaving both the hobby and world behind forcing everyone into their own personal crisis about what Box Peek meant, if anything. Though that is not to conclude that there aren't positive qualities to what Box Peek fictionally, or Pokémon really, is. Giving up a fun game or pastime is a depressing thought in the initial context of *Box Peek's* ending, but it touches upon a more culturally universal nerve of the transition into adulthood and, with it, the negotiation of loss, something Bosman discusses regarding the finale:

If in Pokémon ... if Ash Ketchum ever said, 'I don't like Pokémon' the show would end. And I thought that's really interesting, if one person shows disinterest, that this whole thing could collapse [...]. There's that feeling with friends where like you both love a thing; you love a thing together and suddenly your friend doesn't anymore and that's such a unique pain. (Easy Allies Plays, 2019, 3:57)

Adult fans of Pokémon are likely familiar with the feeling of having lost something along the way, unable to freely play games or share interests as they once did on the playground.

Pokémon is a source of joy, childhood memories, and cultural and mental development for entire generations (Jordan, 2004, pp. 469, 474); Elza (2009) describes it as a utopian fantasy of independence for children (p. 56). Through the games and show, lessons of friendship (Drummond-Mathews, 2010; Bainbridge, 2014), sporting behaviour (Gervasoni, 2018), and familial love (Jordan, 2004, p. 474) can be learnt. Even when these values are self-subverted by the franchise. The core of Pokémon was intended, by Pokémon creator Satoshi Tajiri, to appeal to children and offer them something positive in a post-industrial society (Allison, 2006, p. 200). Specifically, it was the collective childhood memory of bug-hunting, analogous to any number of frivolous childhood activities that are intensely formative. The fictional game at the heart of *Box Peek's* parody can transport us back in time to be a child (repetition) with the knowledge of an adult (difference) to reflect on our own situation and admit, without malice, that the games we play[ed] can be "kinda stupid" and lose our interest, even though we might have greatly enjoyed them.

Conclusion

It is easy to read the end of *Box Peek* as cynically pointing out that the hobbies of (particularly millennial) childhood may only be commercial fads and that our interest in them is as fickle as the childlike wonder that sustains them. *Box Peek* is an examination of the inner child's enjoyment of games and their accompanying media, coupled with the interrogative questions and retrospective sobriety of adult reflection. Though the implied evaluation of shows like *Pokémon* is that they are absurd, inconsistent, and unnaturally inward-looking toward their fictional game, they are still works capable of sincerity and growth despite apparent flaws. If anything, the flaws lead to richer and more fully featured opportunities for humour and asking questions about what we really get out of these fictions and games.

This article has combined a close textual analysis of a rare example of a fictional game that is a parody of other fictionalised games (that is, the TV adaptation of Pokémon and other similar shows) with theoretical reflection and situated this in the perspective of the modern millennial audience of both *Box Peek* and *Pokémon*. It is

timely, given the impact of *Pokémon* on a now middle-aged adult population of millennials, who look back, reflect, and gain critical insight into both negative and commodified aspects of such products (games and their fictionalisations) through the lens of the very media that endeared so many to the franchise, but without demonising their collective childhood memories and culture.

The game of *Box Peek*, like many fictional games, is used to explore how drama and intrigue unfolds, in this case around a site of cultural importance, that is, competitive games or playground trends that are faddish or silly out of context. Fictional games are usually fictional because they are impossible or impractical to realise in the real world and possess advantages for fleshing out the worlds of which they are part. Their rules create drama and opportunities for characters to grow and develop. However, *Box Peek* being a work of parody means that it takes the framework of a fictional game to explore fictionalised games themselves; how they develop fictional inconsistencies, imply larger world-building questions that are ripe for comedic potential, or confront us with our own need to grow and negotiate our relationship with games that once consumed us. Thus, the conceits of their rules and premises, the central nature of these games to the appeal of certain children's shows, are both interrogated and celebrated.

References

- Allison, A. (2006). *Millennial monsters: Japanese toys and the global imagination*. University of California Press.
- Archer, N. (2016). *Beyond a Joke: Parody in English film and television comedy*. I. B. Tauris. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350985506>
- Armbruster, S. (2016). *Watching nostalgia: An analysis of nostalgic television fiction and its reception*. transcript Verlag. <https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839435090>
- Assunção, C., Brown, M., & Workman, R. (2017). Pokémon is evolving! An investigation into the development of the Pokémon community and expectations for the future of the franchise. *Press Start Journal*, 4(1). <https://press-start.gla.ac.uk/index.php/press-start/article/view/64>
- Bainbridge, J. (2014). 'It is a Pokémon world': The *Pokémon* franchise and the environment. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 17(4), 399–414. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877913501240>
- Banks, I. M. (2003). *The player of games*. Orbit Books.

- Bonello Rutter Giappone, K., Majkowski, T. Z., & Švelch, J. (Eds.). (2022) *Video games and comedy*. Springer.
- Bosman, K. (Director). (2018–2019). *Box peek* [Web series]. Easy Allies. <https://youtu.be/oQz6WYtkMSs?si=V3Qs7rrDI3aiHJOs>
- Brougère, G. (2004) '9. How much is a Pokémon worth? Pokémon. In France', in J. Tobin (Ed.), *Pikachu's Global Adventure*. Duke University Press (pp. 187–208). <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822385813-009>.
- Bryce, M., & Davis, J. (2010). An overview of manga genres. In T. Johnson-Woods (Ed.), *Manga: An anthology of global and cultural perspectives* (pp. 34–61). Continuum.
- Dentith, S. (2000). *Parody*. Routledge.
- Drummond-Mathews, A. (2010). What boys will be: A study of *shōnen* manga. In T. Johnson-Woods (Ed.), *Manga: An anthology of global and cultural perspectives* (pp. 62–76). Continuum.
- Easy Allies. (2018a). *Box peek Ep. 1 - Jordy gets a box!* [Video] YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oQz6WYtkMSs>
- Easy Allies. (2018b). *Box peek Ep. 5 - Totally strong-armed!* [Video] YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GIY_TSbrfU
- Easy Allies. (2018c). *Box peek Ep. 8 - A gust of win!* [Video] YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uw_fmt1p7js
- Easy Allies. (2018d). *Box peek Ep. 10 - Showdown with a dragon!* [Video] YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bWICdPwiRHg>
- Easy Allies Plays. (2018). *Box peek live Q&A - Ep. 1.* [Video] YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qYtU7tFndfo>
- Easy Allies Plays. (2019). *Box peek live Q&A - Ep. 10 w/ Amanda Troop!* [Video] YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O1dqejYJFlg>
- Elza, C. (2009). We all live in a Pokémon world: Animated utopia for kids. In M. I. West (Ed.), *The Japanification of children's popular culture: From Godzilla to Miyazaki* (pp. 53–72). Scarecrow press.
- Gehring, W. D. (1999). *Parody as film genre: Never give a saga an even break*. Praeger. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9798400695346>
- Genette, G. (1997). *Palimpsests: Literature in the second degree*. University of Nebraska Press.

- Gervasoni, Q. (2018, July). Pokémon as hybrid, virtual toys: Friends, foes or tools? *8th International Toy Research Association World Conference*. <https://sorbonne-paris-nord.hal.science/hal-02170789v1>
- Gibson, M. (2002). The powers of the Pokémon: Histories of television, histories of the concept of power. *Media International Australia*, 104(1), 107–115. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X0210400112>
- Gray, J. (2012). *Watching with the Simpsons: Television, parody, and intertextuality*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203961360>
- Greene, R., Cushman, S., Cavanagh, C., Ramazani, J., & Rouzer, P. (Eds.) (2012). *The Princeton encyclopedia of poetry and poetics: Fourth edition*. Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400841424>
- Gualeni, S. and Fassone, R. (2023) *Fictional games: A philosophy of worldbuilding and imaginary play*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Heckman, D. (2019). A thousand Pikachus: Capitalism and transmedia. *Hyperrhiz: New Media Cultures*, 21. <https://doi.org/10.20415/hyp/021.let06>
- Hutcheon, L. (2000). *A theory of parody: The teachings of twentieth-century art forms*. University of Illinois Press.
- Internet Movie Database. (n.d.) Box peek – TV series. *IMDb*. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8789584/>
- Johnson-Woods, T. (Ed.). (2010). *Manga: An anthology of global and cultural perspectives*. Continuum.
- Jordan, T. (2004). The pleasures and pains of Pikachu. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 7(4), 461–480. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549404047146>
- Maisenhölder, P. (2018) Why should I play to win if I can pay to win. Economic inequality and its influence on the experience of non-digital games. *Well Played*, 7(1), pp. 60–83. <https://press.etc.cmu.edu/articles/why-should-i-play-win-if-i-can-pay-win>
- Möring, S. (2022) Making fun of *Tetris*: Humour in parodies of a computer game classic. In K. Bonello Rutter Giappone, T. Z. Majkowski, & J. Švelch (Eds.), *Video games and comedy* (pp. 191–213). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-88338-6_10.
- Omine, C. (Writer), & Polcino, M. (Director). (2017, April 30). *Looking for Mr. Goodbart*. (Season 28, episode 20). [TV series episode]. In M. Groening (Creator), *The Simpsons*. [TV Series]. Fox.

- Parker, T. & Stone, M. (Creators) (1997–present). *South park*. [TV Series]. Comedy Central
- Parker, T. (Writer, director) & Stough, E. (Director). (1999, November 3). *Chinpokomon* (Season 3, episode 11) [TV series episode]. In T. Parker & M. Stone (Creators), *South Park*. Comedy Central
- Saarikoski, P., Lindfors, A., Suominen, J., & Reunanen, M. (2022). The *Illuminatus* space game: From an April fools' joke to digital cultural heritage. In K. Bonello Rutter Giappone, T. Z. Majkowski, & J. Švelch (Eds.), *Video games and comedy*. Springer (pp. 133–151). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-88338-6_7.
- Summerley, R. K. (2022). "A tool of efficiency and consumption to destroy man": Irony and sincerity in *Travis Strikes Again: No More Heroes*. In K. Bonello Rutter Giappone, T. Z. Majkowski, & J. Švelch (Eds.), *Video games and comedy*. Springer (pp. 289–305). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-88338-6_15.
- Takegami, J. (Writer), & Itani, K. (Assistant director). (1998, September 14). *Showdown in Pewter City* (Season 1, episode 5) [TV series episode]. In K. Yuyama (Director), *Pokémon the Series*. TXN.
- Togashi, Y. (2005). *Hunter x Hunter—Volume 23* (L. Olsen, Trans.; Shōnen Jump advanced manga edition). VIZ Media.
- Walton, K. L. (1993). *Mimesis as make-believe: On the foundations of the representational arts*. Harvard University Press.
- Yuyama, K. (Director). (1998–2006). *Pokémon the Series* [TV Series]. TXN.
- Zarzycka, A. (2022) Ridiculing the player: Live-action visualisations of game experience in YouTube parody videos as an ambivalent strategy of self-fashioning. In K. Bonello Rutter Giappone, T. Z. Majkowski, & J. Švelch (Eds.), *Video games and comedy*. Springer (pp. 215–232). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-88338-6_11.