

Videofunct: Tagged, triptych online video content

This is purely explorational; a writerly text. A conversation is in progress between the creators and the functionality and capabilities of multiple-streaming, interactive video. Its creators on the frontier, finding future pathways for video experience... Vlogging is evolving at breakneck speeds, video|defunct suggest where this evolution may be taking us. (2008)

In this blogged review of the Videofunct prototype *Pedestrian*, the author Daniel O'Farrell acknowledges the experimental nature of this research project which aims to create some type of synthesis between the video medium and the Internet. Videofunct (VD) (2008) is a collaborative research project between Seth Keen, Keith Deverell and David Wolf that explores an alternative form of online video content that differs from the linear, single window video clips that users are familiar with on the meta-platform YouTube. (2005) In the context of this research, YouTube is seen as a publishing platform for moving-image content that is predominately produced offline and remains largely unaltered by the Internet environment. It is a version of Internet TV that continues the tradition of passive viewers sitting back and watching moving-imagery from beginning to end. In contrast, the aim with this research project is to produce video content online, which responds to some of the inherent characteristics of the Internet and web2.0. Following a project-based research model, an iterative process of design and production is used to generate theory that makes a contribution towards online video as an emerging field of inquiry.

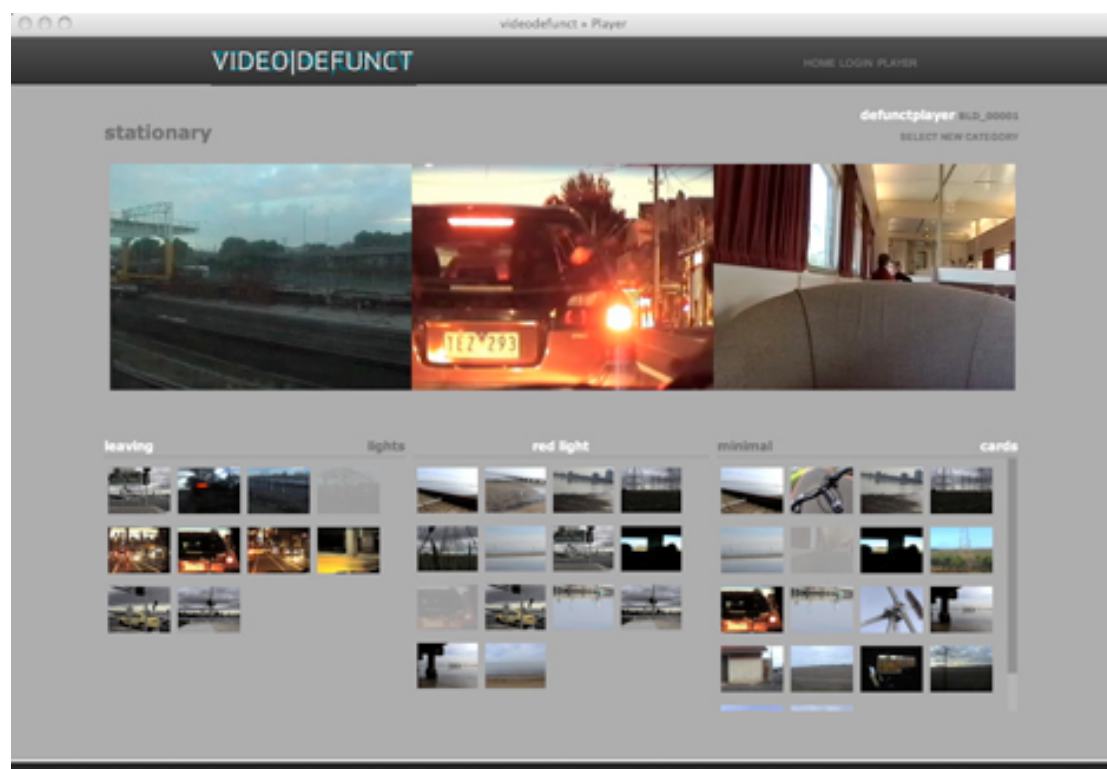


Figure 1: A Screenshot of the Interactive Video *Pedestrian* (2007) by Keith Deverell, Seth Keen and David Wolf.

Videofunct

The 'itch' that motivated the development of the VD system was a frustration with the existing ways that video content was being displayed on the Internet. A key objective

was to find a more poetic way to display online video. With an emphasis on presentation and subsequently the production of content the VD project involves the parallel development of an online video system alongside the production of prototypes as discrete media objects. Each VD prototype provides an insight into the type of content that can be produced, along with design modifications towards the ongoing development of the VD system.

Engaged in an ongoing examination of video blogging as part of teaching and research, I noticed that weblogs originally designed for text-based content were being modified to accommodate video as the main form of content. An early example produced by (*Mefedia* 2004), (now obsolete) was a plugin that automatically created a separate video archive page for video content as it was posted. Video bloggers wanted to separate video content from other posts, for example text-based content and provide users with the option to access that material directly. The design of plugins like this one are motivated by the chronological focus of a blog as a form of online journal in which the idea is to keep providing new material for users as the latest post at the top of the home page. For example, a video blog like *Chasing Windmills* (Rosario & Cordova 2005) acts like a television soap series, utilising this chronological feature to get users to return for the latest instalment. In comparison, some video bloggers see each video clip that they post as having equal relevance for users and therefore they want to provide an alternative form of access.

Being introduced to some modifications that David Wolf, a member of the VD collective was doing on a video blog called the *The Guild of Commercial Filmmakers*, (2007) was the initial impetus for the VD project. Wolf was experimenting with using a video blog to display TV commercials online. He was customising the open source weblog application WordPress (Mullenweg & Little 2003) and sharing his developments on his own blog. Working with a large volume of material, he had designed a streamlined process for posting video clips and a more detailed method of archiving. Over time this customised video blog has moved to incorporate a number of features that provide users with varying ways to cross-reference the television commercials published on the website. The chronological access that features on most video blogs has been removed from the home page, along with the use of the date and time stamp attached to each post.

Starting with Wolf's open source development in WordPress, the VD collective decided to explore a hybrid version of a video blog that moved beyond the display of linear, single window video clips, like TV commercials. We joined the open source community of WordPress developers, but with a twist, for the VD project focused on creating a Video Content Management System. Weblog applications belong to a group of software called a Content Management System (CMS). CMS are designed with a predetermined infrastructure that is used to publish and manage content on the Internet. The presentation of a CMS infrastructure can be modified with varying 'skins', which as the name suggests are the front layer of the web page that is viewed in the browser. Blogs were designed to make personal web publishing user-friendly and accessible – not only how they functioned, but also how they looked. WordPress developers responded to bloggers wanting to personalise the 'skin' of their blogs and enabled the WordPress community to make a myriad of themes for users to download. Themes are made up of a number of template files, which makes them a flexible tool for modifying the way content is presented in web pages. Utilising this flexibility, the VD system was developed as a version of a customised WordPress theme, a type of web template with additional video functionality.

Spatial Montage

In my earlier Masters research (2005), I examined the effect the Internet was having on moving-image narratives. In this inquiry the analysis of a number of case studies led to a focus on Lev Manovich's concept of spatial montage:

This new cinematic aesthetics of density seems to be highly appropriate for our age. If we are surrounded by highly dense information surfaces, from city streets to Web pages, it is appropriate to expect from cinema a similar logic. In similar fashion, we may think of spatial montage as reflecting another contemporary daily experience - working with a number of different applications on a computer at once. If we are now used to switching our attention rapidly from one program to another, from one set of windows and commands to another, we may find multiple streams of audio-visual information presented simultaneously more satisfying than the single stream of traditional cinema. (2001, p. 328)

Interested in exploring the concept of spatial montage, I experimented with a number of projects offline as part of this MA research, which eventually led to working with video online. The affordances of the Internet, along with working with multiple streams of video content, caused the video clips to become shorter in duration. Traditional montage, the editing of a number of shots together to make a sequence was replaced with a single shot. *Train Trip* (2006) is an example of one of these experiments, where a trip to work on the train is broken down into single shots as 'fragments of aural and visual experience, rather than something that starts at a beginning and has an end.' (Keen 2006) The resulting spatial montage in the browser window is nine looping short duration shots that can be viewed simultaneously in varying combinations.

But, *Train Trip* remains limited in terms of the interaction available to the user, with users only being able to start and stop the nine clips that appear in the browser. The next step was to create an interface that allowed users to have more involvement in the construction of the narrative by providing the option to choose numerous clips from an archive. Keith Deverell, the third member of the VD collective had been developing through his VJing practice and Masters Design (Communication) research, interfaces that explored the simultaneous display of multiple video windows. These interfaces, following the VJ process of calling single clips from an archive, acted as a type of mixer. Recognising the potential of integrating the modified WordPress theme by Wolf with Deverell's interface designs produced the first iteration of the VD system.

A customised theme that included a feature that provided the potential to play numerous clips back online in varying multiple video window configurations. This additional web page we called the Videofunct Player. The chosen interface design of this first VD player featured a triptych composition, which allowed three videos to be viewed simultaneously alongside each other. Also, the WordPress developers in the latest update of the application finally responded to the folksonomy practice of classifying content with tagging. Tags are generally used in social media environments on the Internet like social bookmarking, blogging, image and video sharing websites. Tagging generally involves assigning a keyword as metadata to varying forms of content. In most cases tags are created informally by individuals as a way to categorise their own and other people's content. Jan Simons describes a tagging system as providing the opportunity to create a bottom-up method of classification:

Tagging systems are considered as key instruments for this user to control because they allow users to assign keywords of their own choosing to Internet resources of their own making as well as – least in some cases to objects produced by others. These tags are often primarily added for personal use, but in most so-called social network sites, tags are also accessible for other users. Because tagging systems allow users to freely choose and assign keywords, they are expected to liberate users from the oppressive authority of pre-fixed, pre-defined and often not readily intelligible vocabularies of prescribed top-down expert classifications and taxonomies. (2008, p. 239)

Folksonomy is a form of classification that utilises tags to categorise content. The word folksonomy brings together the words folk and taxonomy as a way to describe a type of classification that is created by the both users and producers of content on the Internet. Multiple users usually on user-generated online databases generally create folksonomy forms of classification as a process of collaborative tagging. With the Videofunct system being a closed system, it would be more appropriate to describe tagging being used by a set number of content producers to create 'informal taxonomies', with an archive of video clips. Titles, tags and categories as text-based metadata attached to each video clip, were used in the interface design to allow users to select and mix clips in the triptych composition.

Pedestrian

The first substantial prototype, *Pedestrian*, (Deverell, Keen & Wolf 2007) was produced for a net-art exhibition that was exploring 'how artists use a "blog" for artistic purposes'. (Cologne 2007) *Pedestrian* started out as a vlog response to the banal, the everyday as in plain vanilla, humdrum, boring, run-of-the-mill, dull, and ordinary. The content in *Pedestrian* is shots of locations in Melbourne, Australia and a train trip from Melbourne to Adelaide, in South Australia. Deverell recorded the shots on a domestic level video camera as he moved through these locations. The material has a personal candid tone that reflects his point-of-view. The style of the shots has a lot in common with early home movie footage that documented holiday and travel experiences. These recordings have been edited into short duration clips that vary in length from 15 to 60 seconds. It was intriguing to discover that clips of such short durations could provide so much insight into experiences and locations. Set to loop continually in the interface, each of these clips was chosen to repeat a moment in time at a particular location.

In the triptych composition the central window is used as a pivot point for the left and right windows of video content. To begin the user is given a written list of categories to select from on a separate web page (which was moved directly into the centre of the player page in later iterations). Choosing one of these categories brings up a group of thumbnail images that shows what clips have been allocated to that category. Selecting a thumbnail downloads an individual clip into the central window, revealing the title and tags that have been assigned to that clip. These tag keywords are duplicated in the left and right windows. Choosing a tag reveals another group of thumbnails that have been tagged with that particular keyword. The user can then begin to curate varying combinations of clips together across the triptych composition.

Pedestrian, an experimental work, used abstract themes as categories to create a random viewing with an open narrative structure. What the prototype provided was an introduction to classifying video content, with each of the clips being titled, categorised and tagged. Adding text as metadata to the video clips created

associations between the moving imagery and text. The decisions made with these associations have a significant effect on how the work is read, in regards to the context that this text creates for the viewer. It entails a shifting of the archival process to one that is initiated by the producer of the material, creating a personalised type of 'informal taxonomy' that is then deciphered by the user.

It could be argued that due to working with mainly video content within a blog infrastructure a prototype like *Pedestrian* is situated within the established practice of video blogging. But, generally in video blogs, video content is posted as linear, single window clips that are viewed in isolation as a chronological post. In contrast to this the VD player features as the home page and clips can be viewed together in varying thematic configurations. In comparison, the work is made up of many clips that make up a larger whole. The usual individual posts that are on the home page of a conventional video blog become an archive of video clips that can be called into the VD player by the user. With no date and time stamp on each post the monthly archive system used in conventional blogs and video blogs has been removed. In this archive, like in the VD player, clips can only be accessed through categories and tags.

Hitting vlogging with a hammer

The Hitting Vlogging with a Hammer (Dedman et al. 2008) workshop run as part of the Video Vortex II exhibition revealed a corresponding interest in creating alternative ways to access online video content, across both the VD and Show in a Box projects. Similarly, Show in a Box (SIAB) (2007) was modifying the blog application WordPress into a Video Content Management System. A non-profit community of video bloggers, SIAB are developing a range of video blog plugins and themes. The project comes out of a community that has formed around the mail list (*Videoblogging* 2004) and previous projects including freevlog (Hodson & Verdi 2005) and Node 101 (2005). Video blogging for these communities follows the blogging vision of everyone having the freedom to publish on the Internet and they aim to expand this globally. SIAB as a project progresses this personal media aim and focuses on developing accessible technical tools that allow video bloggers to independently manage aesthetics and publishing.

Similarities between the two projects, as demonstrated in the title of the workshop, involved reshaping the current video blog architecture and interface. In his presentation, Jay Dedman referred to a number of video blogs that demonstrated a need to design a system and interface that afforded alternative means to access video content. He showed his co-presenter Ryanne Hodson's video blog, *Ryan is Hungry* (2004) as an example that utilised SIAB plugins. (2007) The related videos feature used on YouTube influenced the development of the 'VideoPress Related Videos' plugin, that provides the video blogger with the potential to create associations between clips. A connection could be made between this plugin and the process of categorising and tagging used in the VD system. In comparison, the other SIAB plugins rely on chronological influences. 'VideoPress Recent Videos' continues the chronological 'recent posts' feature that has been available for some time in text-based blogs. Also, reclaiming the earlier video archive page with the new, 'VideoPress Video Archive' plugin demonstrates a necessity in the SIAB project to maintain the chronological characteristics of conventional blogging.

In comparison to the VD project, a key objective in the SIAB project is to continue utilising the social media functionalities of video blogging. Most conventional video blogging utilises commenting, trackbacks and web syndication available on each post, as a way to generate connections and communities across other websites. A

defining feature of blogging is the permalink, which provides each post with a singular identifiable web address. The permalink has a significant effect on the social media functionality of blogging by fragmenting a web page into smaller units that can be accessed as individual web pages. In contrast, the VD player creates a type of self-contained media object that is made up of numerous clips. Not being tied to these social media functionalities allows the VD system to move to a form of access that does not rely on an archiving system based on chronology.

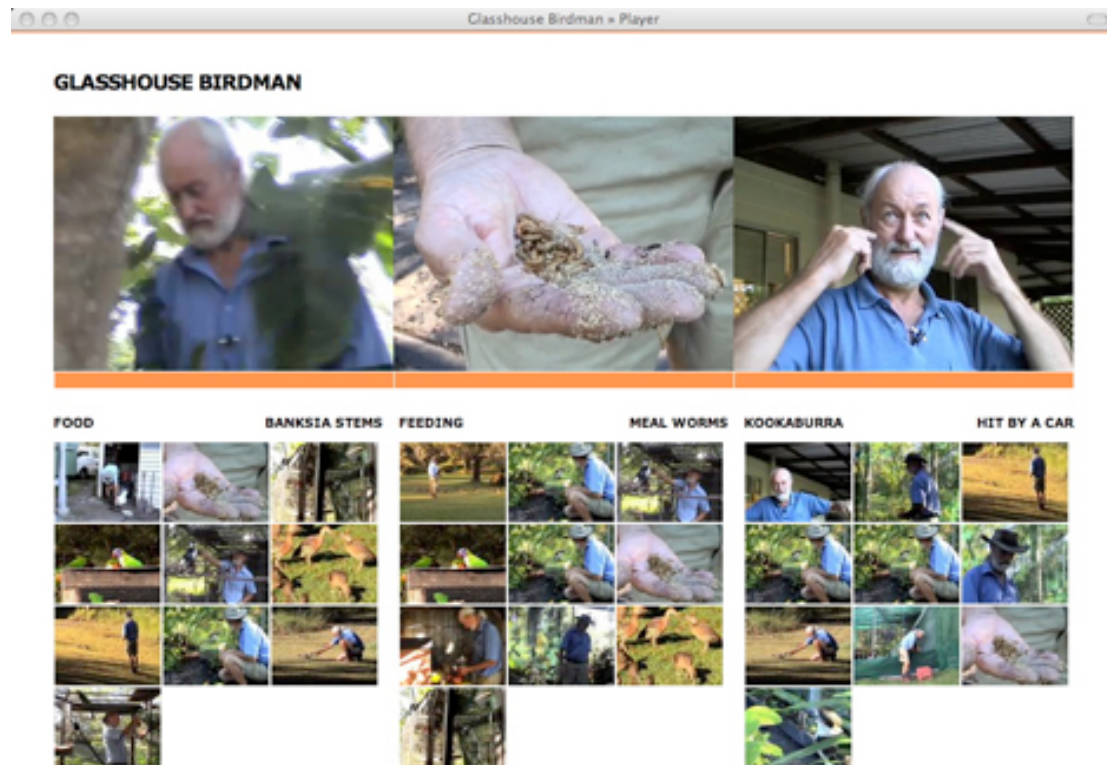


Figure 2: A Screenshot of the Interactive Video *Glasshouse Birdman* (2007) by Seth Keen.

Glasshouse Birdman

Glasshouse Birdman (2007), the next prototype, follows a more traditional documentary approach towards a subject. A form of personalised documentary that captures the day-to-day life of a wildlife carer Terry Dale in Queensland, Australia. I saw this production as a type of video portrait of an individual, capturing their daily routine and stories of their experiences. In this prototype, I used the video camera as a pre-production research tool and did not follow a script. I recorded events related to Dale's interest in caring for birds, alongside activities that reflected the nuances of his character, with the aim to demonstrate the personality behind the passion. The categorising and tagging process online therefore became a pivotal aspect of the scripting process, in terms of making connections between video clips. A process of working out how each video clip should be classified into categories as larger groups and tags as smaller (sub)groups provided more insights into narrative structuration in the VD system. In this example, the use of categories and tags is refined, to create structured narrative pathways for the user to follow. *Glasshouse Birdman* demonstrates how a more traditional documentary narrative could be displayed as

fragmented short duration clips in a non-linear structure, presented in multiple video windows.

Conclusion

These VD prototypes differ from an online video-sharing website like YouTube in a number of ways. The YouTube website acts as a repository for video clips that will be viewed individually in isolation as linear, single window clips. In the VD system the CMS database is used to hold multiple video clips that are viewed simultaneously in a spatial montage composition. The video clips in the VD system as a collection based around a particular subject are viewed together as a larger-scale video work. The VD system propagates a form of interactive online documentary that uses informal taxonomies to create associations across multiple video clips. The post-production of video clips for upload to YouTube in most cases is carried out offline, with the website predominately being seen as a publishing platform. In contrast, although the video content for a VD prototype is also post-produced offline the actual annotation of the video clips and subsequently the creation of narrative is carried out online, as a significant part of making the final work. The Web 2.0 characteristic of tagging used to classify content on the Internet is applied directly to video content and utilised to construct online video narratives. In terms of responding to the affordances of the Internet, the VD system utilises the David Weinberger concept of 'Small Pieces Loosely Joined' (2002) to cut video content up into small short duration video clips that can be brought together into varying malleable configurations. The user shifts from being a passive viewer of single window video clips to an active participant in the construction of narrative, a process that utilises the interactive potential on the Internet.

References

Cologne, WAD 2007, *NewMediaFest 07 a+b=ba? art + blog =blogart?*, JavaMuseum, <http://www.javamuseum.org/2007/a_and_b/?page_id=2>.

Dedman, J, Deverell, K, Hodson, R & Keen, S 2008, *Videofunct and Showinabox: Hitting Vlogging with a Hammer*, Video Vortex II Netherlands Media Art Institute.

Dedman, J & Hodson, R 2004, *Ryan Is Hungry*, <<http://ryanishungry.com/>>.

Deverell, K, Keen, S & Wolf, D 2007, *Pedestrian* Interactive Video, <<http://prototypes.videofunct.net/pedestrian/>>.

---- 2008, *Videofunct*, viewed May 2008 <<http://www.sethkeen.net/blog/videofunct/>>.

Hodson, R & Verdi, M 2005, *Freevlog*, viewed May 2008 <<http://www.freevlog.org/>>.

Keen, S 2005, 'Video Chaos: Multiliner narrative structuration in New Media video practice', University of Technology Sydney.

---- 2006, *Train Trip*, Interactive Video, <<http://dazed.adc.rmit.edu.au/~e62420/blog2/2006/07/04/train-trip/>>.

---- 2007, *Glasshouse Birdman*, Interactive Video, <<http://prototypes.videofunct.net/GlasshouseBirdman/>>.

Manovich, L 2001, 'Cinema as Information Space', in *The Language of New Media*,

MIT Press, Cambridge, MA.

Mefedia, 2004, Beachfront Media, viewed June 2007 <<http://www.mefedia.com/>>.

Mullenweg, M & Little, M 2003, *WordPress*, <<http://wordpress.org/>>.

Node 101 2005, Node 101, viewed May 2008 <<http://node101.org/>>.

O'Farell, D 2008, *Integrated Media: Videofunct*, May 2008, Melbourne, <<http://raws.adc.rmit.edu.au/~s3163382/blog2/?p=77>>.

Rosario, J & Cordova, C 2005, viewed June 2007, <<http://chasingmills.blogspot.com/>>.

Show in a Box 2007, Show in a Box, viewed May 2008 <<http://showinabox.tv>>.

SIAB 2007, *Plugins*, Show in a Box, viewed May 2008 <<http://showinabox.tv/plugins/>>.

Simons, J 2008, 'Another Take on Tags? What Tags Tell', in G Lovink & S Niederer (eds), *Video Vortex Reader: Responses to YouTube*, Institute of Network Culture, Amsterdam, pp. 239-54.

The Guild of Commercial Filmmakers 2007, The Guild of Commercial Filmmakers, Melbourne, viewed June 2007 <<http://theguildfilm.com/>>.

Videoblogging, 2004, <<http://tech.groups.yahoo.com/group/videoblogging/>>.

Weinberger, D 2002, *Small Pieces Loosely Joined*, Persusus Publishing, Cambridge, MA.

YouTube, 2005, Google, viewed March 2006 <<http://www.youtube.com/>>.