VIDEO VORTEX Reader

RESPONSES TO YOUTUBE

EDITED BY
GEERT LOVINK AND
SABINE NIEDERER

INC READER #4

THE CONCEPTUAL POWER OF ON-LINE VIDEO
5 EASY PIECES

MARSHA KINDER

Take Five: On the Pleasures of Modularity and Remix

Now that the internet has proven its ability to stream on-line video effectively and popular sites like YouTube have demonstrated their democratising power, both for original grass-roots works posted by their creators and remixed excerpts from broadcast television that anyone can archive, we are confronted with new questions. How do we avoid becoming *lost* within this growing profusion of video texts without merely replicating the popularity contests found on *American Idol*? How do we distinguish certain videos for their conceptual power, whether it depends on brilliant insights, activist goals, or innovative aesthetics? And how do we discover the distinctive pleasures provided by these videos – most of which are brief, modular and remixable?

This essay addresses these questions through 5 pieces (including this intro), which describe a conference, exhibition, precursor, and research initiative. Like the on-line videos whose distinctive pleasures they seek to define, these pieces are brief (each around 1,000 words) and modular and can be read in any sequence.

In *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (1984), literary theorist Peter Brooks claims all stories are obituaries that provide pleasure by forestalling a premature death. This theory helps explain why so many great narratives are long and why they create an expansive middle as a 'force-field of desire', a narrative field that resists death and other kinds of premature closure. Although this dynamic is best modeled in Scheherazade's use of storytelling to save her life in *The Arabian Nights* (which Brooks uses as metanarrative), it also explains the centrality of biography as a common narrative structure and the historic importance of long experimental novels like Sterne's Tristram Shandy and Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. Though Brooks never wrote about movies, television or digital media, his theory also helps explain the pleasures of serial fiction and electronic games, particularly those in which players struggle to gain new lives for their avatar and avoid premature death at the hands of enemies. In such game narratives – as well as in serial television and game-like films (like *The Matrix, Groundhog Day, Vantage Point* and *Run Lola Run*), there is a built-in drive to extend the period of engagement within the narrative field, even if it involves compulsive repetition. While Brooks's theory explains narrative addiction, it doesn't illuminate the pleasures of modular on-line video, particularly the brief forms now being seen on YouTube.

Where do we find a theory that explains the distinctive pleasures of short narrative forms that rely on visual and conceptual compression? The most obvious source is American poet and short-story writer Edgar Allen Poe, who claimed in *The Poetic Principle* (1848) 'a long poem does not exist' because it 'is simply a flat contradiction in terms.' Insisting that 'a poem

deserves its title only inasmuch as it excites', he concludes 'that degree of excitement... cannot be sustained throughout a composition of any great length. After the lapse of half an hour, at the very utmost, it flags – fails'. He assumes a short attention span and a desire for excitation, characteristics that many contemporary educators blame on television. For Poe, these demands are human not historical. But if all great poems must be read in a single sitting or else lose their emotional impact, how can he explain great epic works with staying power like Homer's Odyssey? Poe argues they should be read as a series of short poems that are combinable with non-poetic material. He sees poems as modules, whose compression enables them to move the listener. Their power relies not on a fear of death (as in Brooks' theory of the long narrative), but on the pursuit of beauty and emotional intensity, which both demand brevity.

Just as Brooks built on Freud's Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Poe builds on Aristotle's Poetics, which claims tragedy is superior to epic because it's 'a more complex, concentrated, and challenging form.' Although Aristotle acknowledges that epic has a special capacity for enlarging its narrative with several plots, he concludes it sacrifices intensity as a consequence. Given that emotional impact – the catharsis of pity and fear in the spectator – is the primary function of poetry, then tragedy reigns at the top of his hierarchy of genres. Both for Aristotle and Poe, it's compression that generates intensity. Although both acknowledge these poetic pieces can be combined with others to create longer forms, it's the modules themselves that are most powerful.

This assumption was challenged by several Russian modernists, who argued for the conceptual power of remix. For example, filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein claimed dialectic montage generates the greatest intensity – not only in long forms like Whitman's poetry and Dickens's novels, but also in concentrated forms like Noh drama and haiku poetry. Under the conceptual compression of dialectics, the new unity – the whole – becomes greater than the sum of its parts, which explains why Soviet montage is ideologically superior to Griffith's binary cross-cutting. Literary theorist M.M. Bakhtin offered a different ideological argument, claiming traditional mixed forms like satire, the epic and the novel contain a clash of languages and conventions that exposes the arbitrary limitations of all cultures. Like contemporary forms of database narrative, a remix of modules reveals the underlying processes of selection and combination, enabling us to perceive the ideological implications of all choices. Such revelations denaturalise those 'master narratives' that formerly housed these modules. While Eisenstein's dialectic montage can be used to explain the affective power of grassroots videos on YouTube, Bakhtin's dialogism helps us understand the value of remixed excerpts from broadcast television.

At The Labyrinth Project, a research initiative on database narrative I've been directing at USC for the past ten years, we have been experimenting with these pleasures of brevity, modularity and remix as we search for new ways to structure video – on-line and in other networked public spaces like museums. We believe these pleasures demand conceptual power and aesthetic rigor. To deny these demands in the name of democracy is to be condescending to grassroots creators, both amateurs and professionals.

The '24/7 DIY Video Summit': Eroding the Line between Amateurs & Professionals

On Feb. 8-10, 2008, the Institute for Multimedia Literacy at the University of Southern California hosted its first annual international summit on 'Do-It-Yourself' video as social practice. Creators, scholars, activists, policy-makers, technologists and entrepreneurs were invited to present their own videos or curate works by others (from YouTube, Revver, imeem, Stage 6, Eyespot, and other popular on-line sites) and to explore cultural issues raised by this key moment of media transition.

On the first panel, 'The State of Research', speakers David Buckingham (a British expert in qualitative audience research), Michael Wesch (a media ecologist doing a participatory ethnography of YouTube) and Eric Garland (a corporate researcher from BigChampagne Media Measurement) discussed the democratising power of viral distribution and its fast-paced movement across the cultural mediascape. They agreed one of its most important effects is the erosion of the line between grassroots creators and media professionals. Although similar erosions were anticipated in earlier eras (with the introduction of super 8 and 16mm cameras and portable video recorders), this boundary was subsequently reinstated by media professionals and the corporate worlds who backed them. Though industry journals predict this same pattern will occur with on-line video, [1] Buckingham, Wesch and Garland claimed there is no going back.

The one person on the panel who argued against this erosion of boundaries between grassroots creators and media professionals was respondent John Sealy Browne (former director of Xerox PARC), who claimed we should embrace amateurs and their 'good enuf' aesthetics and reject professional auteurs and their self-serving peripherals – proprietary authorship, elitist aesthetics, and copyright. This argument drew objections from media studies veterans and documentary activists like Alexandra Juhasz, who reminded us that independent artists waged similar battles in earlier eras by resisting commercial co-option and making powerful works that challenged mainstream values. Yet, they were still professionals. Others asked: if YouTube is merely going to celebrate the most popular amateur videos of the week – regardless of content or aesthetics, how will it enable us to move beyond the *American Idol* mentality and the current level of broadcast television? Isn't it condescending to assume that amateurs are incapable of aspiring to aesthetic rigor or conceptual innovation, particularly if we accept the premise that users always know best?

What remained clear at the Summit is that the assessment of DIY video can't ignore content because the same old power struggles get replayed and remixed on new media platforms – not only in terms of their means of production, but also their modes of distribution. This is a lesson we learned from Raymond Williams and Carolyn Marvin, who trained us to be wary of the claims made by utopian theorists like Marshall McLuhan and his exaggerated technological determinism.

1. See Catherine Holhan 'Web Video: Move Over, Amateurs,' *Business Week* (November, 2007).

Yet, the Summit's keynote address by MIT media guru Henry Jenkins showed that we still need to be mindful of their warning. The main ideas for his talk came from Jenkins' newest books (*Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide and Fans, Bloggers and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*), which build on his earlier work on television fandom (in particular, 1992's *Textual Poachers: Television Fans an Participatory Culture*). Jenkins' speech showed how participatory culture's erosion of the line between creators and users has been greatly accelerated by new media practices. Although his description of participatory culture and convergence was fairly straightforward and certainly sound, his choice of examples was problematic. For, despite Jenkins' earlier ground-breaking work on gender and technology with Justine Cassell (*From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*, published in 1998), his talk re-inscribed the same old gender stereotypes: active males and passive females.

As his chosen embodiment of participatory culture, Jenkins chose to depict Jessica, a young teenage girl in her bedroom downloading videos from YouTube as she simultaneously did her homework and listened to music on the same computer. Yet, according to Jenkins, the really significant intervention, the one that had real impact on the culture, was performed by a young African American male whose self-produced video taught the music industry a lesson about new modes of distribution and fans like Jessica how to do a new dance. In all fairness, later in his talk Jenkins did describe a female media producer, but this example hardly challenged gender stereotypes, for, consistent with Laura Mulvey's classic 1975 feminist essay on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,' this young creator displayed her own body in provocative poses as visual spectacle. Although one might defend Jenkins' choice of examples by arguing that they are what you are liable to find on YouTube, Mary Kearney's book *Girls Make Media* (2006) tells a very different story about the activist bedroom culture that exists around girls like Jessica.

How do we account for this blind spot in a sophisticated media scholar like Jenkins, a writer who has been sensitive to issues of gender and race in the past? Perhaps it's because he was too exclusively focused on changes in media technology and thus ignored this continuity on issues of gender (though not of race). It's those other missed continuities that have also antagonised activist video-makers like Juhazs, who witnessed this new generation of ethnographers ignoring decades of work that has been produced in media studies by scholars and creators who were grappling with similar issues. The indifference to continuities was not shared by all Summit participants, certainly not by Anne Bray, the Director of LA Freewaves, the independent media arts festival that has been screening cutting-edge work (video, film and new media) by grassroots activists and professional independents for the past 18 years. Although Summit organizers, Mimi Ito, Steve Anderson, and Holly Willis, went out of their way to include a broad spectrum of independent creators and media scholars across several generations and media, and purposely created a timely, provocative dialogue across disciplinary divides, the utopian hype about on-line video still prevailed. Technological determinism dies hard.

The Getty's California Video Show: Medium Specificity and Historical Context

On March 15, 2008, a major exhibition on 'California Video' opened at the Getty Center in Los Angeles. Curated by Glenn Phillips, the show features 62 works made in California from 1968 to the present. While the bulk of the works came from the video archive of the Long

Beach Museum of Art (which the Getty acquired in 2006), several more recent pieces were added. These helped make the show look forward rather than backward. Instead of providing historical contextualisation for the activist era of the 1970s (during which over half of these works were originally made and exhibited), the show emphasizes what that early video work helped spawn. It highlights 'the Getty's major commitment to the preservation and exhibition of a young but vital artistic medium'.

'California Video' seems designed to appeal to the YouTube generation. It invites comparison between its own large body of works and the grassroots videos currently being displayed on popular on-line sites. Both settings provide a tube of plenty, a diverse array of videos that can be read in various ways. In the spirit of YouTube, the Getty seems reluctant to impose any 'official' curatorial reading, as if that might be seen as elitist or passé.

Although most of the videos in the show are non-digital, 'California Video' emphasises the cultural shift that occurred in 1967 with the introduction of a then-novel technology: Sony's Portapak, the first portable video-recorder. What links the diverse range of texts this new mobile medium helped generate is the desire to create a personal alternative both to commercial media production and traditional 'high' art, one that could be created by lone artists in their own space, a desire still shared by those using YouTube.

This idea is blatant in the first piece visitors encounter, John Baldesari's *I Will Not Make Any More Boring Art* (1971), made with the Portapak, which explores the novel conceptual pleasures promised by this new video medium. Yet, by showing his own arm writing this motto, Baldesari also evokes French critic Alexandre Astruc's famous phrase *caméra-stylo*, which called for an independent cinema whose 'means of expression' would be 'as supple and subtle as that of written language.' Though Astruc's remark became a rallying cry for the French new wave cinema of the late 1950s and 60s, it could just as readily be applied to video. Thus, from the beginning of the exhibition, those with an historical sensitivity are bound to see cinema as the show's structuring absence.

If the exhibition had historically contextualised its starting year of 1968, this date would have demanded engagement with cinema and the role it played in the Paris uprisings that politicized media studies worldwide. Instead, the show uses 1967 as its historical anchor, the year that the Portapak was introduced, which implicitly privileges media specificity over socio-political events. This emphasis on medium specificity helps explain why the show omits independent West Coast filmmakers (like Pat O'Neill and Chick Strand), who stuck with celluloid, even though their works engaged with some of the same conceptual issues, often with greater artistic impact, than the videos here at the Getty. If the show had included such filmmakers, then perhaps the curator would have had to go even further back to modernist movements in film and photography to trace this activist drive toward independence.

Instead, the show explores what happens when a new low-cost mobile medium is made accessible to independent grassroots creators. Despite occasional references to the Kennedy assassination, Vietnam War, and other well-known political events within the individual pieces, the exhibition provides little help in explaining the original social political background.

Unfortunately, without this contextualisation, many of the pieces lose their original conceptual power. Not surprisingly, many of the exceptions date from a later period, and some of them explicitly address medium specificity by being presented as installations rather than as single-channel videos on a small screen. For example, Bill Viola's 1992 work 'The Sleepers' consists of a series of buckets containing video monitors with facial close-ups of sleeping persons. The piece makes us rethink our relationship to images: whether images are contained in our minds or we reside in the images, a thematic central to his big LACMA show in the 1990s (which included this piece). Another exception is Jennifer Steinkamp's 2008 piece 'Oculus Sinister', which the Getty commissioned for the show. Interwoven streams of coloured lights are projected into the skylight of an alcove, making us wonder whether this is a phenomenological vision of mental interiority or an exterior sinister heaven, or the material medium itself – which combines the eye and the light.

In contrast to the creators of DIY videos exhibited on YouTube, most of the video-makers in this show see themselves as artists, not amateurs – yet many were engaged with parodying popular culture. The show omits the cultural debate in the 1970s and 80s over video's relationship to television. While some video artists in the show – like the Kipper Kids, the Yonemoto brothers and Patty Podesta – made pieces that reinscribed movies and parodied broadcast television for their own activist ends, others like Viola and Steincamp created a serious dialogue with painting and sculpture.

Given the show's turn toward the future, perhaps we should fast-forward to see where some of these video artists now stand on this issue. While Norman Yonemoto continued his parodic dialogue with movies and television and personalised the notion of interactivity by looking at medical technologies used on his own body, Podesta has moved into cinema, as a successful art director both for mainstream films like *Jurassic Park* and *Bobby* and for activist indies by Gregg Araki. Even Viola, whom the Getty featured in a 2003 solo exhibit called *The Passions* (which explored connections between Renaissance devotional painting and slow motion video), has recently moved into the popular realm with a visionary electronic game called *Night Journey*. Even during the *The Passions*, I remember Viola's delight when he heard a radio DJ describe LA traffic as moving at the speed of a Viola video. What better proof that his videos had become mainstream?

La jetée: Database Narrative and Precursors

Whenever I teach Chris Marker's classic short film, *La jetée* (1962), I tell my students that all of you have the material means to make this film – and with YouTube, the means to distribute it. All you need is Marker's conceptual power! Comprised almost entirely of still photographs with accompanying voice-overs and music, this little black and white short arouses a combination of emotional and intellectual pleasures that are far more intense than those generated by the expensive feature films it later helped inspire – *Twelve Monkeys* and *The Terminator* series. The intensity of these pleasures are based on the film's reliance on brief modules – a series of still photographs, with accompanying narrative voice-overs – to create a moving database narrative.

Database narrative is an empowering form that reveals the process by which characters, actions, settings, objects are chosen from an underlying database and recombined to make

stories. By calling attention to these processes of selection and combination (in which both authors and users are involved), it provides access both to a series of rival narratives (whether truth or fiction) and to the underlying archive of materials out of which they are spun. By combining database (a dominant form in contemporary digital discourse whose politics tend to be disavowed) with narrative (the traditional form it supposedly displaces whose ideological baggage is well known), the database narrative exposes the ideological workings of both. For, every database or archive is designed for a particular kind of knowledge production with specific goals, and the decision of what items to include or exclude, and what categories to use as structuring principles, and what metadata to collect for later retrieval – all of these decisions serve master narratives with ideological implications.

Although this concept of database narrative has emerged in the information age (when computers, the internet, on-line archives, search engines, navigation systems, wikis, blogs and YouTube reign supreme), one can find many precursors in earlier non-digital narrative forms, whose structures also called attention to the ideological function of archives. While this concept of database narrative enables us to see new dimensions in these earlier works, the precursors enable us to envision more powerful conceptual uses of digital archives and on-line video for the future.

In Marker's *La jetée*, human survival depends on an individual's storehouse of images from the past, and his ability to retrieve one powerful image from his childhood: a violent scene that occurred on the jetty of the Paris airport. The emotional intensity of the scene is registered on the face of a young woman, which is stored in his memory. Once this image from the past is embedded within a story, it is refigured as a premonition of the future – the vision of his own premature death which the rest of the film helps delay.

La jetée presents not only personal memories but also film history and museums as our most valuable cultural repositories, for the story is driven by a search engine that dramatises the productive interplay between these private and public archives. The story is set in Paris after World War 3 – specifically in the basement of the *Cinemathéque francaise*, one of the world's greatest film archives which became central in the Paris uprisings of 1968, when students, workers and activist filmmakers tried to bring down the government of Charles de Gaulle.

Marker's film also refigures the science fiction genre, which in Hollywood is usually expensive and high-tech and where human survival similarly depends on expensive cutting-edge hardware (think of Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* from 1968). But in Marker's modest little short, survival (like the film itself) depends entirely on conceptual power and on the rich interplay between image and narrative. It shows the power of narrative to re-contextualise the meaning of images, and the power of images to generate multiple stories.

In *La jetée* the archive (which doubles as prison-house) is no neutral repository but is leveraged for ideological ends – to save the world, to retrieve information from the past that will enable us to reshape the future. The victors appropriate the private memory banks of the losers, and use selected images to serve their own ideological goals, which are quite different from those of the men whose archival memories are being mined.

My favourite scene is the one where the man and the woman from the past go to the natural museum of history where they look at displays of 'timeless animals' –an archival exhibition of stuffed animals and fossils. On the one hand, these displays are indexical signs of dead animals from the past, yet they simultaneously function as symbols of evolution, growth, and transformation – the future. This same temporal doubleness also applies to the man and woman, who portray living subjects in this scene, but who (like the stuffed animals and all movie and video performances) are merely dead images from the past. This is the kind of time image liberated from movement and action that calls attention, not to 'timelessness' but to cinema's and video's complexities of layered time – what Deleuze calls 'the time-image'. This dimension helps us use this film as a way of envisioning the future.

My main point is this: in the 1960s Marker and his colleagues from the French new wave (Resnais, Varda, Godard, Rivette) were grappling with the ideological implications of archives and exhibitions (of movies, television, museums and other networked public spaces), revealing the kinds of knowledge production they embodied and denying they were merely neutral repositories of information. Instead, they were sites of on-going struggles over master narratives – between public collections and private memories, between history and subjectivity, between political action and emotional immersion. These ideas did not have to wait for the introduction of portable video as a medium of activist production or for the internet as a democratising mode of distribution; they were already being expressed via independent cinema with great conceptual power.

Labyrinth's Database Narratives: Stochastic Systems and Archival Cultural History

All of Labyrinth's works are 'database narratives' that reveal the process by which story fragments – images, sounds, texts – are chosen from archives and recombined to make a series of rival narratives. To expose this process of knowledge production, we frequently make this database structure visible. These works combine contributions by artists and amateurs, creators and users, professional historians and ordinary people telling their own life stories. As archival cultural histories, they involve a series of re-orchestrations in which on-line users and museum-goers participate. Labyrinth's database narratives all feature brief video modules that can be combined in a variety of ways. The mix is presented as a stochastic system – a term Gregory Bateson used to describe evolution: a combination of design, choice and chance. The brevity of the individual modules works toward emotional intensity, yet we include narrative lures to prolong the users' engagement within this force field of desire, where closure and other forms of premature death can be resisted. This combination (of brevity and prolongation) enhances the conceptual power of the pieces, both from amateurs and professionals. Here are three recent examples.

The Danube Exodus: The Rippling Currents of the River is an immersive installation based on a 1997 video by Hungarian artist Peter Forgács (known for remixing vintage home-movies with archival footage). This particular video remixed amateur footage shot by Captain Andrásovits, who in 1939 transported Jews fleeing Hitler along the Danube to the Black Sea where they boarded a ship to Palestine, and the following year carried Bessarabian German farmers back to Germany after their lands were reannexed by the Soviets. Using Forgács' 60-minute video as 'found footage', Labyrinth collaborated on 're-orchestrating'

it into a large-scale installation (with forty hours of footage), which was later remixed by museum-goers as they moved from room to room – a chain of appropriations that raises questions of agency and authorship.

To emphasise this chain of re-orchestrations, we divided the installation into five spaces, each presenting a different remix of the story. An antechamber with material objects (charts, maps, books) provided an overview, showing how the stories of the Captain and refugees are interwoven within a larger cultural history. A website (by C3 in Budapest) enabled visitors to add their own stories. Two interior side spaces – one devoted to the Jews, the other to the German farmers – had touch-screen monitors that enabled visitors to explore backstories of the voyages and interviews with survivors. A central 'poetic' space with five large screens and immersive sound, spatialised the rivalry among the three stories, enabling visitors to choose brief modules featuring either the Captain, the Bessarabians, or the Jews. This was the structure for the 2002 premiere exhibition at the Getty Center in Los Angeles, but was reconfigured for each subsequent venue: in Karlsruhe, Barcelona Helsinki, Ulm, Budapest, Berlin, Berkeley, the Hague, and New York (where it opens in March 2009).

The immersive poetic space always arouses the greatest emotional intensity, yet has few words and minimal interactivity. On a touchscreen monitor, eighteen icons (with moving video imagery) periodically emerge out of the river. As soon as one is selected, a brief (5 to 7 minute) narrative 'orchestration' takes over all five screens and cannot be interrupted. We deliberately chose intensity over agency because we realized the emotional power of Forgács's films depends on their rhythms. The large scale presentation also heightened the intensity. For, instead of being displayed within a modest domestic space, these home movies of ordinary people in crisis were projected in the kind of multi-screen public venue that is traditionally reserved for epic heroes or villains like Napoleon and Hitler. By moving them from the margins into the historical spotlight, we were insisting that 'amateur' footage of ordinary people deserves public attention.

Russian Modernism is on-line constructivist courseware that enables users to learn by helping to build it. Designed as free open-source software and scheduled to be launched in September 2008, this courseware provides a collaborative setting and creative tools for anyone to use. Demonstrating how successive media enrich rather than replace each other, this site shows how many aesthetic principles now being used to expand digital culture (remix, intertextuality, constructivism, synaesthesia) have historic roots in Russian modernism.

The courseware features three components: a multimedia archive based primarily on the holdings of USC's Institute for Modern Russian Culture; a series of interactive lectures (on Nothingness, Velocity, Petersburg, Vertov, The Bomb, The 1905 Revolution) by noted scholars in the field (including Yuri Tsivian of The University of Chicago, Olga Matich of UC Berkeley, Jon Bowlt of the University of Southern California and Lev Manovich of UCSD); and a role-playing game called 'Montage: A Russian History Game for the Masses', set at the 1896 All Great Russian Expo at Nizhny Novgorod, where cinema was first exhibited in

Russia and where artists, scientists and activists were presenting new visions of the 20th century. The game shows how the unique combination of artistic experimentation, radical politics and new technologies, defined the cultural specificity of modernism in Russia.

Like YouTube, our site features two kinds of on-line video: historical footage from the archive that is accessible to any user, and original contributions. My favourite example is a music video called *Autumn* made by former USC student Timur Bekbosunov and his Peruvian partner Sandra Powers, based on a song written by Russian-Gypsy cabaret singer Vadim Kozin. They created two versions – one in English, the other in Russian, each with a different visual remix. This video has also been uploaded on YouTube and myspace, yet our site provides a framework that highlights *Autumn*'s full conceptual power. For it embodies the primary point of our project – finding roots in Russian modernism for aesthetic concepts needed to expand contemporary digital culture.

Jewish Home-Grown History: Immigration, Identity and Intermarriage is an on-line exhibition and travelling installation (in production) that generates a dialogue between personal memories and official history. Dramatising Homi Bhaba's ideas of the interplay between a fixed pedagogic history and a performative rewriting from the margins, this project enables ordinary people to engage with questions of historiography as they tell immigration stories about their own family. Weakening the boundary between private and public history, it enables users to see how their own contributions enrich, complicate or challenge what is supposedly known, and how they merge with and transform the official record.

The first year will be devoted to a California pilot called *Jews in the Golden State*, which will premiere at the Judah Magnes Museum in Berkeley (where it will become part of their permanent collection) and at another venue in Los Angeles. The full national version (partly funded by a grant from NEH) will travel to Philadelphia, New York and Chicago.

Both the on-line archive and museum installation feature a software tool, which can easily be adapted to other themes and communities. Users can choose either to browse through the archive or contribute their own data. As soon as a user enters the dates and origins of her family's emigration to America, trajectory lines instantly appear on a map. As she answers other questions and uploads images with captions or home videos, these contributions immediately call up other materials that contextualise this input – video excerpts from newsreels, interviews or documentaries; clippings from newspapers and journals; quotations from history and literature; commentaries by historians on our advisory board. These materials generate a database narrative on the fly, which, in the installation, will be projected on a large screen and watched by other museum-goers, literally positioning the user as a performer of history.