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## THE WILDERNESS ONLINE: HOW INTERACTIVITY IS CHANGING MUSIC VIDEOS ON THE INTERNET

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Video games are like video clips...the game is the youth saving himself from the threat of domination posed by the industrialized world. The computer is the means of this threat and the means of resisting it: MTV is the product of capitalism and the means of resisting it (Fiske 76)

For John Fiske, MTV was the ultimate post-modern playground. A 24-hour kaleidoscope of sight and sound, it denied the signified by giving all the power to the signifier (Fiske). Writing in 1986, only five years after the birth of the channel, Fiske's writing has proved prescient; in this essay, he compares the endless stream of music videos to video games, as both offer the opportunity for resistance while still constraining it. If this is true for each medium separately, what then can be said about their confluence? What power do music videos hold when they have moved off the television airwaves into the tubes of the Internet, and have begun to incorporate the same ambivalent interactivity of video games? What is the power of the interactive music video?

This paper explores interactive music videos as a new area for academic inquiry. It provides a history of music videos leading up to the ascendance of interactive music videos, and then explores a series of projects to illustrate the range of approaches the genre covers. Finally, the paper produces a brief analysis of the genre, meant more to stimulate future, more focused analyses than to represent an exhaustive review of the field.

### Music videos, then and now

There is no broad consensus on what moment could be called the birth of the "music video." Music has been a fundamental element of cinema since sound films first became possible – the very first "talkie" was Al Jolson's *The Jazz Singer* (1927), a musical. Musical performances were a television staple from very early on, sold in blocks to fill gaps in television programming as early as the 1950s (Austerlitz 15). The Beatles and other major acts of the 1960s and 1970s shot promotional videos for their

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songs to supplement their live appearances. The Beatles' efforts are often considered the first examples of the modern music video: clips that were not simply straightforward recordings of the band's performance, but short films that, as Saul Austerlitz puts it, "engage[d]...with the artistic potentialities of the form" (20).<sup>1</sup>

However long and circuitous their past, most scholars of music videos plant their flag at the birth of MTV, the first twenty-four hour music video channel, and the company that revolutionized the music video industry. From its debut in 1981, MTV generated a demand for music videos that had the music industry had never seen before. Not only did this demand generate more revenue for the music industry, it also provided fertile ground for the birth of a new genre, complete with its own conventions and clichés, as well as a roster of star directors (Gondry, Jonze, Romanek, etc.) who continuously challenged them.

In spite of this richness, by the mid-1990s, the music video boom had begun to taper off. In a competition to push the boundaries of bigger and better, music videos budgets had exploded, while the revenue they brought in declined. Unable to compete with more moderately budgeted scripted shows, or the even lower-budget reality programs that became MTV's new calling card, music videos were relegated to the after hours or the spinoff channels. The novelty of music videos had worn off. Fans used to listening to their music on demand (via records, cassettes, or, later, CDs) grew frustrated with the limited control they had over how they could view music videos. Music videos had always been a risky investment – they generated no revenue on their own, but were rather expected to attract revenue through the sales of advertising spots, an arrangement that became increasingly untenable.

In a happy historical coincidence, this decline occurred just as networked computer technologies had begun to reach a point of mainstream saturation and sophistication capable of handling the uploading and viewing of short videos. P2P filesharing programs had already begun to revolutionize the music industry, but as bandwidth expanded, people began to share not just songs but the music videos for them across these networks. The new social media phenomenon, particularly the popular site Myspace, gave fans a place to showcase their favorite videos. Video hosting site YouTube quickly became a clearinghouse for music videos, with the genre accounting for one of the largest categories on the site (Burgess and Green 44). The Internet became the new twenty-four hour music video channel, except this channel was on-demand, responsive and participatory.

With the Internet, the last ten years have been a music video renaissance. The broadly accessible nature of YouTube has allowed smaller-budget videos to make a bigger impact than ever before. One notable example is the indie rock group OK Go. The group had produced some moderately popular singles off their first album, complete with some regular airplay on MTV for their professionally produced music

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<sup>1</sup> For a longer and more detailed discussion of the history of music videos, see Austerlitz, "Music Video in Fugue," *Money for Nothing: A History of the Music Video from the Beatles to the White Stripes*, and Kinsley, "Form: A Short History of the Music Video," *We Used to Wait: Music Videos and Creative Literacy*

videos. When they released their second album, they recorded choreography to their song “A Million Ways” they had planned to use during live shows on video, and distributed it to fans, who then shared it with other fans across the Internet (Siegel). In June 2005, acknowledging the video’s popularity, the band included a link to the video on their official website; by August 2005, the video had over 500,000 views, and by November the number had increased to 3 million (Garrity). Building off the success of “A Million Ways,” OK Go recorded and released another low-budget video for their single “Here It Goes Again,” which received over 1 million views in its first week (Garrity).

Maura Edmond identifies “Here It Goes Again” as a “watershed moment” that “confirmed, for anyone who might not have yet realized it, that the natural home for music videos had moved from television to the Internet” (306). This is not just because of the opportunities the Internet opened to smaller acts, but also because of the opportunities it opened to fans. The popular “music video” category on YouTube is populated not just by official music videos released by artists, but also by fan-made covers, remakes and remixes. Furthermore, artists have taken advantage of the affordances of the Internet beyond YouTube, often hosting their new music videos on sites specifically designed to promote that single. As Saul Austerlitz puts it, the Internet did not kill the music video – it mutated it (221).

### **Interactive music videos**

One of the most high-profile interactive music videos is *The Wilderness Downtown* (hereafter referred to as *TWD*), a website released by Canadian band The Arcade Fire for their 2010 single, “We Used to Wait.” Designed in partnership with Google, the project was a way for Google to show off the interactive capabilities its browser, Chrome, offered in HTML5, the recently released update to HTML (“Chrome Experiments: The Wilderness Downtown”). The website asks users to input the address of their childhood home. Multiple screens appear in time with the music, some taking the viewer on a tour of their hometown using Google Streetview images from Google Maps, while others show a silhouetted individual running through suburban streets. Users can interact with flying birds and leave messages to their past selves on a postcard, whose highly stylized, generative typeface evokes trees extending their willowy branches.

The video was widely acclaimed, both for its wistful aesthetics, which reflect the nostalgic tone of the song, and for its technical complexity. In 2011, the project became the first music video to earn a prestigious Cannes Cyber Lion Grand Prix award. Scholar Rebecca Kinskey describes it as having “tapped into a zeitgeist shifting distinctly from viewers as audience to viewers as users and coauthors of digital experience” (8). *Time* magazine called it “the first video that truly harnesses the digital age – and one of the most personal you’ll ever watch” (Sanburn).

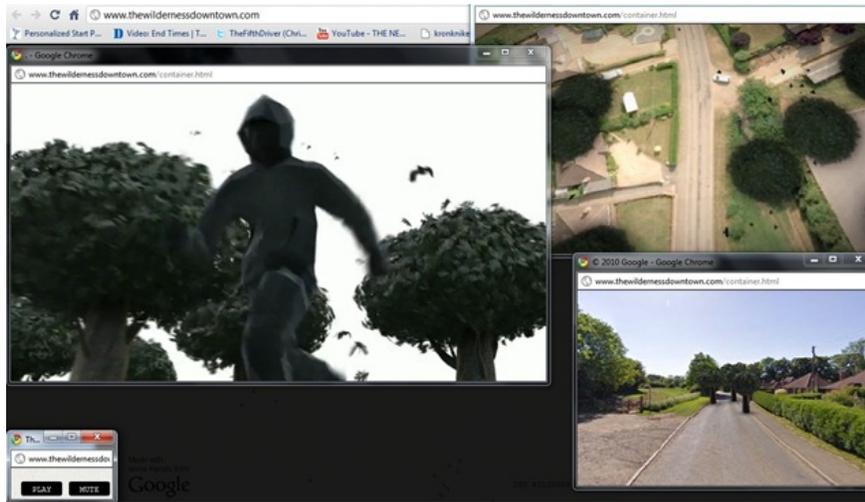


Fig. 1: The Wilderness Downtown, 2011, dir. Chris Milk

For director Chris Milk, *TWD* was a project that embraced the full interactive potential of the Internet that the move to YouTube had somehow ignored:

“I knew a bit about the capabilities of HTML5 and have always had a preoccupation with technology. I wanted to delve deeper, to see what else it could do. The technology becomes the palette that you make the artwork with, your palette and your paint.” (Kiss)

In spite of, or perhaps even because of, its position as one of the first major interactive music videos to use HTML5, *TWD*'s interactive affordances are remarkably broad. The bulk of the video revolves around the entering of the address, which already creates a unique, personalized experience for each user. The postcard at the end of the video allows users to write in two ways, either by using their mouse to scrawl out letters, or using their keyboard to type them out. Even the landing page from the site, where the user types in her address, presents a bit of subtle interactivity: in the background are flocks of birds that respond to the movements of the user's mouse, flapping away to avoid it.

In 2014, pop artist Pharrell Williams (commonly referred to by his first name only) released his own interactive music video, to a similar barrage of praise. *24 Hours of Happy* (dir. We Are from LA; hereafter referred to as *24H*), the project for his single “Happy,” won multiple awards, ranging from Internet excellence (the Webby Awards) to advertising (the Clio Awards). In this video, fans can scroll through 24 hours of footage, in which actors of all shapes and sizes dance along to an endless loop of the song. The interface for the song lines up each clip with a specific time of day, so putting the cursor at 6am pulls up a clip of someone dancing at sunrise, while putting it at 9pm shows an actor dancing at night. In contrast to *TWD*, this is a very limited mode of interactivity. The only way to manipulate the video is by changing what time of day you want to see.

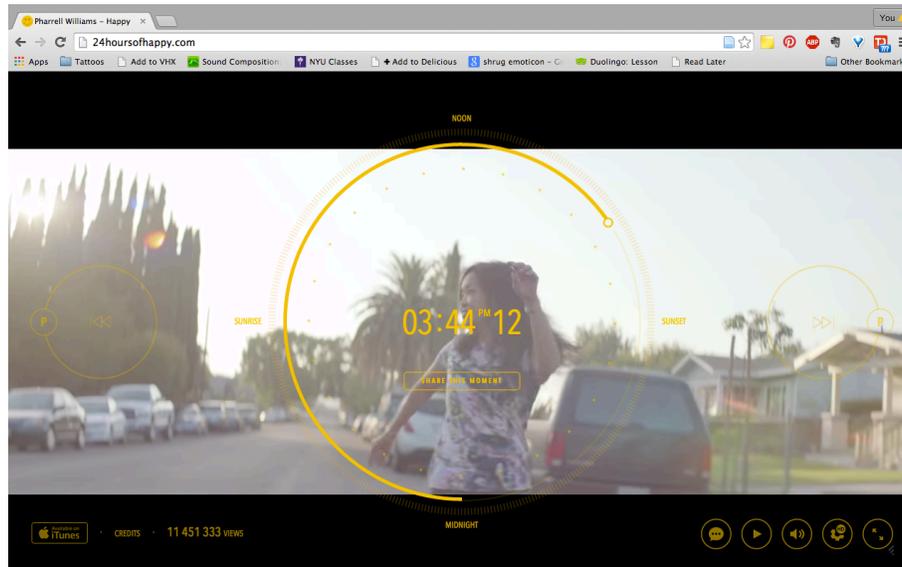


Fig. 2: 24 Hours of Happy, 2014, dir. We Are From LA

The manipulation of the visual elements of a video may be, by far, the most common approach to an interactive music video, but it is not the only one. Predating even The Arcade Fire’s iconic video, in 2009 California indie rockers Cold War Kids released an Internet-only video for their single, “I’ve Seen Enough” (dir. Sam Jones). The website features each of the four members of the band playing the song on their own separate track. By clicking on buttons over the musicians, the user can toggle through four instrumental options for each of them: for example, the drummer can be playing either a traditional drum set, a small logic board, a tambourine, or a pared-down drum kit. In this way, the user can mix her own version of the song. The visuals are spare, but the aural possibilities are plentiful.

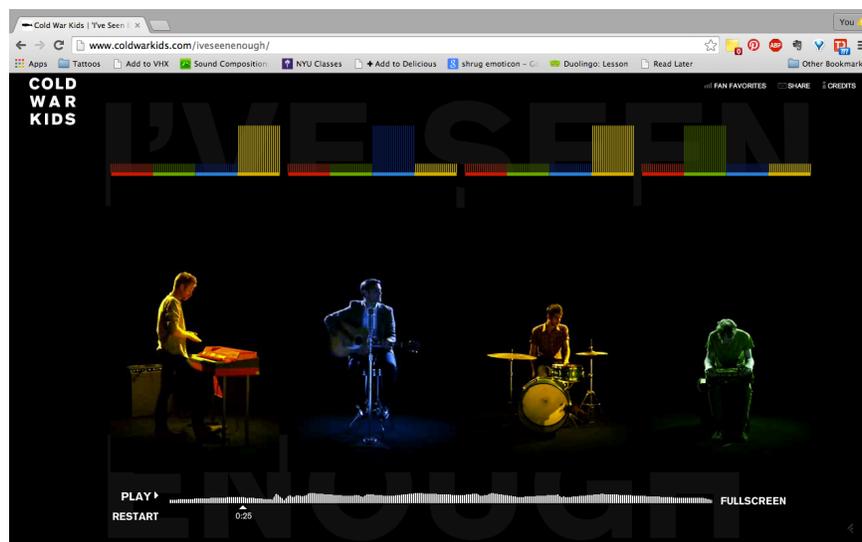


Fig. 3: “I’ve Seen Enough,” 2009, dir. Sam Jones

While the vast majority of interactive music videos use the conventional tools of interactivity available to computers – the mouse/mousepad and the keyboard – a few

notable projects have experimented with other inputs. The Arcade Fire released a “dance activated” video, *Sprawl2* (2011, dir. Vincent Morisset) for their single “Sprawl II (Mountains Beyond Mountains)”, in which users could control the tempo of the dancers on the screen by waving their hands faster or slower in front of their webcam. In 2013, The Arcade Fire took this idea a step further by involving multiple devices. Their interactive video for “Reflektor,” (dir. Vincent Morisset) their first single off their 2013 album of the same name, allowed the use of a smartphone to manipulate the images that appeared on the computer screen. Shot in Haiti, the video told the story of a “young woman who travels between her world and our own” (“Just a Reflektor”). After opening the website on their computer, viewers are asked to open a specific url on their smartphones, which then allows the computer to read the location of the smartphone in front of the computer’s webcam. By moving the smartphone in physical space, the viewer can manipulate the images on the screen in different ways depending on the scene, and in some scenes the viewer themselves is projected into the video (via what the webcam is recording).



Fig. 4: *Sprawl2*, 2011, dir. Vincent Morisset



Fig. 5: *Reflektor*, 2013, dir. Vincent Morisset

### **Interactive, emphasis on the “active”**

From this small sampling, we can see that the chimerical nature of interactive music videos can frustrate many traditional approaches to media criticism and analysis, and thus require a new, hybrid approach. On the one hand, these projects are still very much the intersection of sight and sound that has been explored since the early days of MTV (Frith et al.; Vernallis). On the other hand, those sights and sounds are now subject, inasmuch as the algorithms and computer programs allow, to active engagement from audiences.

Here it is worth distinguishing this analysis from the active/passive dichotomy found in some media theories. As cultural scholars such as John Fiske and Henry Jenkins have shown, so-called “passive” audiences of such media as television and film are often very “active,” both in their reception of the content, and their use of it. Early scholars of music videos hailed the medium as offering particularly rich opportunities for such active engagement, citing the impressionistic and fragmentary style of these videos as being remarkably open to audience interpretation and resistant readings (Harvey; Fiske; Hall, quoted in Grossberg).

My use of the phrase “active engagement” refers not to the reception or use of the material, but the very experience of it. Interactive music videos allow users to

actively alter the nature of the very material itself as they are viewing it. To use Stuart Hall's model of encoding/decoding, with interactive music videos we can say that the audience is no longer simply left to decode a finished project – instead, encoding and decoding happen simultaneously, as the user decodes both the material on offer and the options for interaction, and encodes new material through that interaction (to then be decoded again).

There is a tempting normative assessment underneath many of these observations: that interactive music videos with more limited affordances for interactivity are more indicative of a narrow, perhaps cynical drive to sell a product, while those with more expansive affordances truly invite the co-production of an artistic experience or other more genuine modes of audience engagement. However, the rich body of research on conventional music videos on the Internet indicates the reality may not be so cut and dry.

Burgess and Green point out that music videos on YouTube (and, thus, their ability to be embedded on other social networking sites) are important tools for communicating identity on the web (50–51). Furthermore, as mentioned before, the confluence of the increased availability of video hosting via YouTube and the accessibility of tools of video production (via webcams, camera phones, free editing software, etc.) has produced an explosion of user-generated music videos in the last two decades. Many of these videos are individuals performing music themselves, but many are fans emulating or remixing videos their favorite artist has recently released. This is particularly common with music videos that feature dancing. The global reaction to Pharrell's video for "Happy" is an illustrative example. In addition to putting up the interactive website *24 Hours of Happy*, Pharrell released a four-minute-long music video on YouTube, a clip show of the dancers featured on the website. The Internet proliferated with videos of fans dancing along, including from countries where dancing is prohibited: a group of seven young Iranians were eventually arrested and sent to prison for producing and distributing their version of the "Happy" video, shot in Tehran. Conventional music videos have been, and continue to be, a dialogical site of identity formation, expression and resistance.

The question remains as to whether interactive music videos can serve the same purpose. By inviting such specific forms of engagement – click here, type there, use your webcam in this way – it could be that interactive music videos obligate certain kinds of interpretation while proscribing others, making it difficult to create remixes or parodies of these projects. Moreover, the approximate technology used to produce conventional videos is fairly broadly available; while there are of course differences between professional-grade digital cameras and your run-of-the-mill camera phone, the camera phone is just as capable of capturing moving images as the professional camera. The same is not true for the technology required to produce many interactive videos, whether it be certain technological skills, such as the sophisticated coding capabilities required by many of these projects, or access to certain resources, as with The Arcade Fire's partnership with Google to get access to their Maps application. This puts emulation, the ability to remake the video, out of reach for most fans.

As an overview, this paper is unable to delve into whether fans feel interactive music videos are indicative of a more genuine connection with their favorite bands, or whether they feel the format constrains their opportunities to respond or remix. This could be a rich avenue of inquiry for a future project. However, what is clear is that this new genre is prompting these and other questions about the nature of new media genres emerging on our digital, networked platforms. If the move from television to the Internet mutated the genre of music videos, perhaps this new movement is another radical step in that evolution.

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