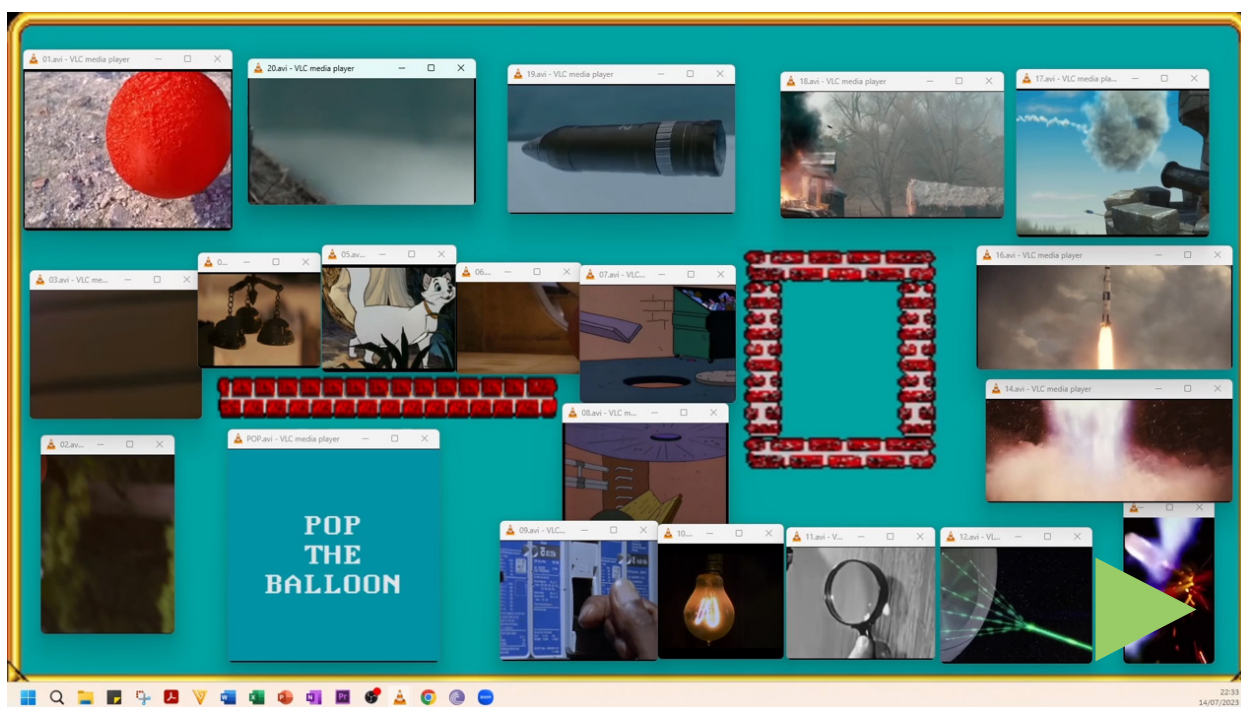# "This Is Not What I Normally Do"
An Insignificant Step in the Downfall of the Humanities

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Abstract
This video essay, a product of the "Videographic Methods and Practices: Embodying the Video Essay" workshop (Bowdoin College, July 2023), is comprised of two sections, exploring constraint-based approaches to videographic scholarship. Part 1, "The Incredible Machine," documents an attempt at recreating a 1990s Rube

Goldberg-inspired computer game interface through the handling of various film clips arranged on a computer desktop. The deliberate avoidance of digital shortcuts highlights the value of playful experimentation within scholarly and artistic practices. Part 2, "The Five Obstructions," presents five interviews conducted under randomly-assigned constraints, fostering unforeseen responses and creative insights. These ludic experiments demonstrate the potential of constraints to stimulate creativity and to provoke unconventional outputs. Emphasizing process over outcome, the video showcases the laborious yet rewarding nature of scholarly experimentation, echoing a broader shift towards embracing the creative-academic journey in videographic scholarship.

Keywords: Videographic criticism, embodiment, constraints, creativity, experimentation, ludic activity

Guiding text

This video grew out of the "Videographic Methods and Practices: Embodying the Video Essay" workshop (Bowdoin College, July 2023). It is comprised of two sections, both conceived as experiments in constraint-based approaches to videographic practice and discourse. These are playful in nature, and employ self-imposed constraints that may seem arbitrary, perhaps foolish, without knowing where they might lead. Yet, as I hope to demonstrate, such playful, foolish experimentation has value for both artistic and scholarly practices, in the vein of Charles Darwin's pollen experiment, which he reportedly conducted not knowing where it might lead, commenting: "That's a fool's experiment. But I love fools' experiments. I am always making them" (Biskjaer and Halskov 2013, 33).

   In Part 1, "The Incredible Machine," made during the Bowdoin workshop, I attempted to reenact a hypothetical level of the 1990s computer game, "The Incredible Machine," which has players construct increasingly-complex Rube Goldberg machines meant to achieve specified outcomes. I recreated this premise on the computer desktop, manually arranging various film clips to trigger in sequence. I used screen-capture software to record many, many such attempts, while another camera captured the "reverse shot," documenting both the labour involved in the task, and the reactions

of the various scholars and makers who happened to inhabit the shared workspace, unaware that they were being filmed.

While the task could have been accomplished easily using various digital means – as some of the onlookers handily point out – it was the decision to follow restrictive, self-imposed constraints prohibiting the use of such "crutches" that made the experiment as long, as frustrating, and as productive to document as it has turned out to be. This voluntary adoption of arbitrary constraints falls within the realm of the ludic: the "experiment" functions much like a game, as what Bernard Suits has called a "lusory attitude": the activity of attempting to achieve a specific goal while adhering to rules which "prohibit use of more efficient in favour of less efficient means" (Suits 1978, 41). Put another way, "playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles" (ibid.).

This ludic, constraint-based approach carries over to Part 2, "The Five Obstructions," made in the weeks following the workshop. This section consists of excerpts from five interviews with scholars and makers who were asked to watch Part 1 and respond to it, assessing its scholarly merits (or lack thereof). Each interview was conducted under a randomly-assigned set of constraints, an experimental approach loosely inspired by *The Five Obstructions* (von Trier and Leth 2003). While in Part 1, constraints were placed on the process by which a predetermined result was to be achieved, in Part 2, arbitrary constraints were meant to direct the interviewees in unknown directions, prompting responses they would not, presumably, have given otherwise. Part 2 thus utilizes the potential of constraints to facilitate creativity, provoking creative outputs by "overriding the tendency to go with the familiar, which will likely yield only clichés" (Haught-Tromp 2017, 11).

More than merely a ludic activity, the adoption of constraints is indeed commonly employed within artistic practice, where constraint, in its broad sense as "a limitation or obstacle voluntarily accepted by the artist" (Rodriguez 2008, 39), is often seen as a catalyst for artistic creativity. As Biskjaer and Halskov have argued, the willing submission to such "creativity constraints" on the artistic process serves as "both a hindrance/restrainer and a resource/enabler for creative agency" (Biskjaer and Halskov 2013, 37). The use of playful, at-times arbitrary constraints in artistic practice, they argue, can function as "radical experimentation": "doing something

'crazy' or foolish just for the sake of it in order to see what happens," as in Darwin's "fool's experiment" (ibid., 33).

This constraint-based approach is also practiced within videographic scholarship. Christian Keathley and Jason Mittell, for example, hold that "*formal parameters lead to content discoveries,*" and that working "according to often arbitrary formal parameters" can lead to new insights, unattainable through traditional analytical methods (Keathley and Mittell 2019, 6). Likewise, Alan O'Leary's notion of "parametric scholarship" is premised on the adoption of "more or less arbitrary *self-imposed constraints*" (O'Leary 2021, 76). Such scholarship, he suggests, diverges from "traditional" scholarship in enabling a mode of knowledge production that is "procedural and creative rather than propositional: it suggests not 'Given this, what do we now know?', but 'Having made this, what can we do next?'" (ibid., 93) – an approach also evident in Mittell's discussion of "emergent analysis," in Part 2.

Embarking on these experiments, I did not know where they would lead. In each case, I had an intuition that something interesting might happen, but did not know what it would be or what form it might take, let alone why it might be of scholarly value. I had to make it first. My approach thus echoes Catherine Grant's, when asked to "defend" the rationale behind her research: "I'd rather just carry on with experimenting and seeing where it leads" (Grant, qtd. in Branco 2018, 533).

This video emphasizes process over outcome. As Mittell has argued, while research in the humanities is often framed as "the finished products of scholarship," its scopes and methods are more expansive, and "the processes of discovery and experimentation are often the more exciting and insightful parts of scholarly endeavors" (Mittell 2019, 228). The creative, productive values of these processes are often left out of the final product, as traditional conventions of academic writing dictate that "the labour and process must be effaced" (Grizzaffi 2020, 9-10). Scholars often find themselves working to "cover their tracks," as "the paths travelled to produce 'outputs' must be meticulously effaced in the final product" (ibid., 10).

But scholarly research could be viewed more expansively, enabling the recovery of these "lost" sites of creativity and production. This is particularly evident in research practices that embrace a

more open, essayistic approach to scholarship (Grizzaffi 2020, Grant 2020). The essayistic, as suggested by Georg Lukács, emphasizes "not the verdict […] but the process of judging" (Lukács 2017, 40); it is, as Phillip Lopate describes it, "a continual asking of questions – not necessarily finding 'solutions,' but enacting the struggle for truth in full view" (Lopate 2017, 111). I have likewise attempted to emphasize journey over destination, presenting not only the "successful" outcome, but the struggles and frustrations along the way, as noted by Barbara Zecchi in Part 2. I dwell on "failures" – my own (Part 1) and those of my interviewees (Part 2 and the end-credits sequence). As in *The Five Obstructions*, the video is intended as "a creative and open-ended adventure […] whose outcome was not premeditated" (Rodriguez 2008, 40), where a constraint-based thinking process unfolds "in fits and starts, uncertain of its destiny, its path and its nature" (ibid., 55).

The process also bears evident traces of its context of making. The "experiment" holds no presumptions of objectivity or reproducibility; it would not have been possible, nor taken such a form, in any other context but the one it happened to take place in: the Bowdoin College workshop. The imprint of the context of making is thus an integral part of the video, which is why I have deliberately emphasized it, explicitly presenting it in the intro, and leaving in various in-jokes, such as the intentional misspelling of participants' names, or the use of clichéd musical cues. I did so fully aware that these may be exclusionary – as was the workshop itself, as noted by O'Leary in Part 2 – and that this privilege, the privilege that perhaps enables all "fools' experiments," should be acknowledged.

Likewise dependent on context is the extent to which such mode of knowledge production can be considered "new." The experiment's constraint-based approach potentially situates it at the intersection of the ludic, the artistic, and the scholarly. And if some of its performative, experimental aspects might be considered "new" within the discipline of videographic scholarship, it is only achieved by embracing previously-established artistic and ludic practices. The context of making is thus integral in determining the value of such knowledge-production practices and in recognizing its precedents, as keenly observed by Dayna McLeod in Part 2.

Finally, while frustration is prominently featured and commented upon throughout the video, it is by no means the primary emo-

tion I experienced while making it. The experiment in Part 1, much like the experience of playing "The Incredible Machine" (and many other games), can be an exhausting, arduous process of trial-and-error – as indeed could be said of much of (videographic) scholarship more broadly. And yet, these activities, for all the time and effort they demand, the failures and dead-ends they may lead to, can be as fun as they are frustrating, as pleasurable as they are painful. Thus, I hope the final product manages to convey just how much fun it was in the making. Like Darwin, I too love fools' experiments.

Note
All individuals appearing on screen gave consent to be featured in the video.

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