

Have You Seen Everything? Accessing Content in Web-Based Interactive Documentaries

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Introduction

Interactive documentaries are based on databases, which they often draw attention to in some shape or form. Lev Manovich suggests that the process of engaging a database is “fundamentally distinct from that of watching a film or reading a story” (Manovich 1999, 81). In the case of interactive documentaries, filmmakers have nevertheless “sought in one way or another to ‘coax narrative meaning out of an interactive database,’” as Kate Nash adds (Nash 2022, 18). Referring to N. Katherine Hayles, she continues:

Databases, Hayles argues, are not unstructured collections, but rather collections that are ordered in particular ways to focus user attention and choice. They create a field of possibilities (that may be more or less explicit), within which specific actions become possible (or impossible) and meanings emerge. (Nash 2022, 19)

Such “possibility spaces” then, as Hayles dubs them, are not simply to be described in terms of “objects accessed, or paths taken”. Even database elements that are “not selected [...] nevertheless contribute to understanding and shape action” (Nash 2022: 19). Incorporating this in her engagement with database narratives, Nash analyses “their organisation, and the ways in which this might foster or resist users’ inclination to make connections, the extent to which the database is visible to the user and so on” (Nash 2022: 19). One aspect of Nash’s analysis is the concept of “database voice”, which refers to Bill Nichols’ idea of “voice” as that which constitutes a “text’s social point of view”, and conveys this perspective to the viewers (Nichols 1983, quoted in Nash 2022, 24). The database voice, then, is constituted by the way in which the above-mentioned “possibility space” is created, within which the documentary elements are organized (Nash 2022, 24). The interface is, according to Nash “the most visible dimension” of said database voice and is where most of this voice is conveyed to the viewers. Apart from promoting “aesthetic experience”, this database voice also “frame[s] engagement [and] provide[s] tools for action”.

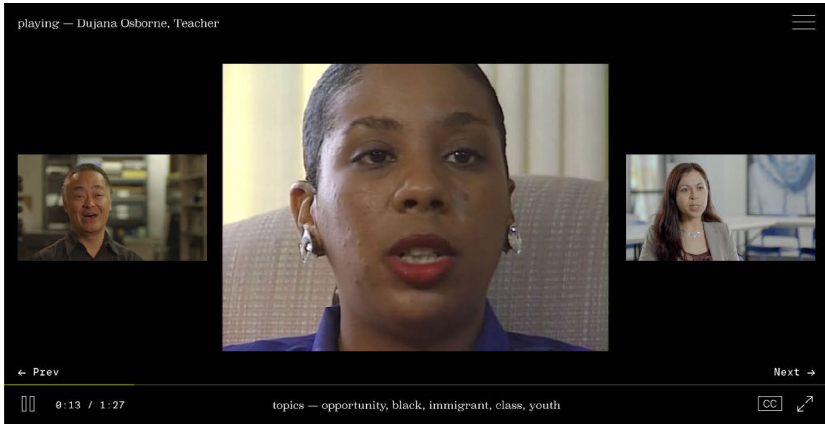
The interface is the decision point that determines what parts of the database are made accessible or visible, what is hidden, while “engaging users in processes of deduction, inference, or aesthetic appreciation” (ibid.).

I would like to take the concept of database voice as an entry point into engaging with how different interactive documentaries structure access to the documentary, the viewing experience, and movement through a database. The question of how database voice is expressed through the visual interface will be approached by means of two examples: The interactive documentaries *K-Town'92* by Grace Lee (2017) and *Pregoneros de Medellín* by Ángela Carabalí and Thibault Durand (2015). Both of these are structured by databases and engage with means of making the fragmentation of their documentary knowledge visible. Nevertheless their approaches to the documentary and the access they provide reveal differing structures: between clarity and a lack of transparency.

Spreading Out the Database

The interactive documentary *K-Town'92* by Grace Lee (2017) deals with the civil unrest in Los Angeles that took place in late April and early May 1992. The film's aim is to give a platform to the voices that were not heard at the time and thereby to challenge and re-contextualize the way in which the issue was reported on TV news in 1992 (cf. Lee, quoted in Warren 2020). For this purpose, an archive of around 1,850 video clips was created, containing TV and archival footage from 1992 as well as newly recorded material from 2017.

After an opening segment that introduces the general topic of the film, a video sequence starts playing on a black background. It shrinks after a few seconds, which allows for one-to-four additional sequences to appear beside it, playing at the same time. In this “spatial montage” – that is, in its “simplest case” according to Manovich, a juxtaposition of two images “appearing on the screen at the same time” (Manovich 2001, 322) – only the sound of one of those videos will be activated, while the others are muted. By default this will be the sequence that had been playing from the beginning, but by moving the cursor over the other sequences, their sound can be activated, replacing the sound that had been playing previously. Furthermore, clicking on another sequence moves it to the middle.

Fig. 1: *K-Town'92 Interface* (Lee 2017)

Source: Screenshot *K-Town'92* (Grace Lee, 2017)

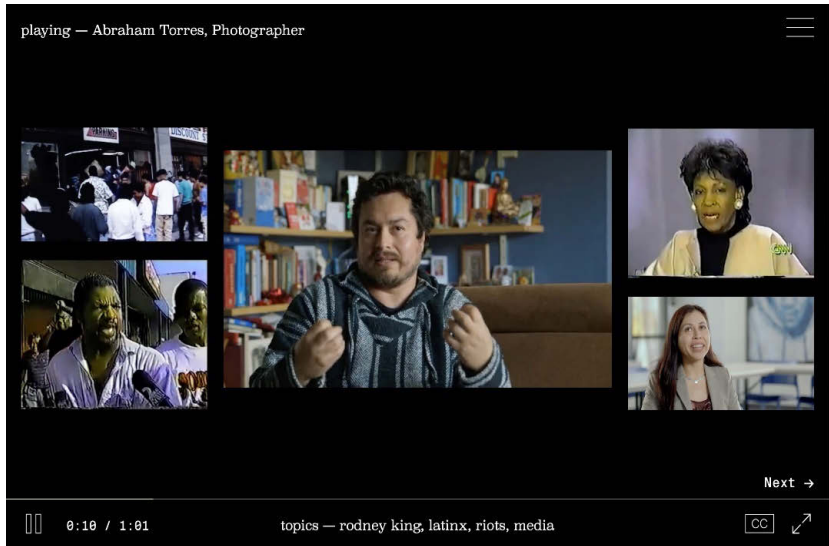
The interactive options here concern the selection of the sound and the position of a sequence in the spatial montage, i.e., the arrangement of the images in the interface. The fact that many of the sequences in the database consist of talking-head interviews leads to spatial montages of up to five such interviews playing at the same time – a format that does not usually present a lot of knowledge visually but rather via the spoken word. The arrangement of sequences in a spatial montage draws the viewer's attention to how much of the material – and hence the information – they are missing. Adding to this is the sheer size of the database, as it is effectively impossible to watch all 1,850 clips or at least to retain an overview of what has been seen and what has not.

In this montage “a number of separate ‘micronarratives’ [...] accessible to the viewer at once” (Manovich 2001, 322) and the database on which the film is based are visualized in a “database aesthetic” (cf. Krautkrämer 2012). The film literally spreads out the complexity of the discourse that the film wants to highlight on the screen and visualizes a multiperspectivity that, according to the film, was missing in the reporting of 1992. Employing a “mosaic” structure highlights “complexities and contradictions”, while at the same time drawing attention to the “impossibility of definitive understanding” (Nash 2022: 35). *K-Town'92* is informed by counterpublic ideas, which Hito Steyerl understands as discourses that strive to “create an alternative or critical public sphere”, supporting the underlying idea of replacing “false” information with “true and good” information (Steyerl 2006: 97f., freely translated).¹ Apart from this

1 In the German original: “Hier wird die Herstellung einer alternativen oder kritischen Öffentlichkeit angestrebt“ (Steyerl 2006: 97); “Dahinter steht letztlich ein lineares und zutiefst auf-

counterpublic idea, introduced by an opening sequence, *K-Town'92* abstains from a clear and singular message. It is the interface, organized by these spatial montages (Manovich 2001: 322), that gives the film its coherence – and that bears a message in itself.

Fig. 2: Screenshot *K-Town'92 Talking-Heads Interviews* (Lee 2017)



Source: Screenshot *K-Town'92* (Grace Lee 2017)

K-Town'92 is a database narrative in the sense that it consists of narratives “whose structure exposes or thematizes the dual process of selection and combination that lie at the heart of stories and that are crucial to language,” in the words of Marsha Kinder (Kinder 2002, 8, quoted in Nash 2022, 19). Database narratives constantly “reveal [...] the elements from which narratives are constructed” (Nash 2022, 19). By doing so, they do not suggest “inevitability, completeness [and] singularity”. Instead, “the database draws attention to contingencies, alternatives, and the process of construction” (Nash 2022, 18).

The film overlaps with Groys’ description of media art in the museum to some degree. Groys describes the impossibility of a “definitive understanding” and overview of an artwork as an inherent quality of media art in museums. According to him, the aesthetic value of the media installation lies above all in its lack of clarity. While

klärerisches Kommunikationsmodell, dem zufolge es ausreicht, die ‘falschen’ Ideen durch die ‘richtigen’ und ‘guten’ zu ersetzen” (Steyerl 2006: 98).

in cinema “the movement of the images is compensated for by the immobility of the viewer” (Groys 2003, 269, freely translated),² in media installations in museum spaces, both entities can be in motion. The visitor lacks the same degree of control over their time and attention they would usually enjoy in the “museum space” (Groys 2003, 271, freely translated),³ which is also something that some installation works explicitly pick up on. Groys cites Andy Warhol’s *Empire* (1965) as an example of this – an installation lasting more than eight hours, consisting of a static view of the Empire State Building played back in slow motion (Groys 2003, 273). In a similar way, *K-Town’92* also demonstrates to the recipients their lack of control by showing them everything they “miss”.⁴ In *K-Town’92*, statements must remain fragmented and can only be considered partially “correct”. This is also helped by the fact that *K-Town’92* is web-based, which allows it to grow constantly.⁵

Simulations and a “What-If” Mode of Knowledge-Making

When Kate Nash writes about database narratives, she draws attention to how they make us aware of the “limits of knowledge” in documentary representation. But she does not only highlight this with reference to narratives built around a database. The same potential exists, according to Nash, with respect to simulations, specifically in interactive documentary games or interactive documentaries that use game elements. The concept of simulation is central to Nash’s understanding of interactive documentary games. She writes that in such simulations, the “enacting body of the user provides a way of vivifying real events and experiences” (Nash 2022, 88). Capacities such as “[I]magination, performance, exploration, experimentation, and play” are employed as part of an “engagement with reality” (Nash 2022, 82). Referencing William Uricchio, Nash writes:

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- 2 In the German original: “Im Kinosystem wird die Bewegtheit der Bilder durch die Unbewegtheit des Betrachters kompensiert.“
 - 3 In the German original: “Der ästhetische Wert der Medieninstallation im Museum besteht also vor allem darin, die Unübersichtlichkeit, die Ungewißheit, die fehlende Kontrolle des Betrachters über die Zeit der eigenen Aufmerksamkeit in musealen Räumen explizit zu thematisieren, in denen bis dahin die Illusion der vollständigen Übersichtlichkeit herrschte.“
 - 4 This can also be recognized in other interactive documentaries. One that demonstrates this very clearly is *Thinking about Restitution* by Martin Doll, which he also discusses in this volume. At the end of this film, the interface shows the viewer all the clips that they missed – while making it impossible for these clips to be selected and watched.
 - 5 While there are 1,853 clips in the database at the time of writing, there were roughly 1,700 in 2020, according to an article in *Film Independent* (Warren 2020).

[S]imulation games are “machines for producing speculative or conditional representations”, arguing that in their ability to foreground alternative realities and promote a “what if” mode of engagement that simulations have the potential to challenge notions of “fact” and “fixity” in historical representation. (Nash 2022, 85)

Through the subjective, bodily, and performative processes that underly them, simulations make apparent that the truth shown is only a “truth’ as it is provoked, simulated, modified, or catalysed,” as Kate Nash continues (Nash 2022, 91). What Nash describes highlights qualities that are frequently cited as what we could call “core motivations” for the project of interactive documentaries, such as “openness, fluidity, dialogue, and multiperspectivity” (Aston/Odorico 2022, 7) and the lack of “a clear dramaturgic arch” in such documentaries, which, rather than showing a linear sequence of images, open up a “field of possible relations” (Miles quoted in Wiehl 2018. 40).

Fig. 3: Screenshot *Pregoneros de Medellín Interface* (Carabali/Durand 2015)



Source: Screenshot *Pregoneros de Medellín* (Carabali/Durand 2015)

Like database narratives, simulations in interactive documentary games also have the potential to make us aware of these “limits of knowledge”: They show processes and let users engage with “the ways in which different, oftentimes competing, forces shape real-world outcomes” (Nash 2022, 101). I would like to engage with this field of potentials that has been opened up concerning database narratives and simulations with reference to the example of *Pregoneros de Medellín* – an interactive

documentary that involves both simulation and the database, and which therefore asks what it would mean to activate the potentials of refusing completeness and embracing openness, though it arrives at an unexpected result.

Scrolling through the Database

Pregoneros de Medellín (2017) by Ángela Carabalí and Thibault Durand is an interactive documentary that uses game elements. The film's subjects are street vendors in Medellín who use chants, shouts, and songs to sell wares such as soup, sweets, or fruit. The film uses a scroll story with a Google Street View-like aesthetic as its interface. By scrolling, viewers can stroll through the streets of Medellín's city center, meet street vendors, and get to know their stories. When moving forward, the viewers are asked at certain crossroads where they want to turn. Every now and then, a street vendor announces themselves, their chant getting louder and louder as the viewer moves closer, until they can finally be selected. Once selected, one of three videos per vendor will start playing, each of which shows the vendor at work, the roles their chants play in it, and their personal lives. There are five vendors or vendor groups that can be encountered. By selecting them and watching their stories, the viewer unlocks their icons in a bar at the foot of the interface.

In the text he wrote documenting the making of the film, director and back-end developer Thibault Durand describes at length the various ideas that were tested out to produce the effect of “meeting the vendors”, such as animated pop-ups. Not having reached a satisfying result, they then came to a different solution: “[W]hat if the street vendors are actually in the street when we will shoot? This solution raised some logistics complexity, but it was clearly the best way to go. It's 100% reality!” (Durand 2015).

This film offers viewers a simulation that could be understood in terms of a “microworld”, i.e., “a virtual world that contains a condensed version of the most important variables and characteristics of a given domain” (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. 2007, 263). It provides the viewer with a simulated experience of seemingly coincidental encounters with vendors, together with a first-hand experience of their life stories, which here serves as a strategy of authenticity. Kate Nash calls such things “reality effects” as they “link media experience to truth claims” via “modelling, representation, and experience” (Nash 2022, 83). The film achieves this largely through its map-based structure, which can be recognized in other interactive documentaries as well. One of these is *Refugee Republic* (Visser et al. 2015), which uses a drawing of a mental map as its interface. Another, *Jerusalem, We Are Here* (Naaman 2016), uses informative maps as well as Google Street View as its underlying interface. In both, the idea is to navigate through the space provided and, by doing so, gain information about it. *Pregoneros de Medellín* also builds upon this existing media practice of

leveraging Google Street View, but that product was not available in Medellín when the film was produced. Therefore a Google Street View-inspired aesthetic was created using a bicycle and a head-mounted GoPro, as Durand described in his making-of.⁶ Within this microworld, it is not possible as a viewer to influence the landscape. Rather, the idea is to become a part of it while moving through it. As Durand writes in his narrative: “*Pregoneros de Medellín’s* story is: stroll through the street, enjoy the urban soundscape, be surprised by the *pregones* (street-vendors shouts) and meet them” (Durand 2015). Thus, a key technique of this interactive documentary is a certain “*flânerie*”, to use a term invoked earlier by Lev Manovich. This *flânerie* takes place in navigable space, which is, according to Manovich, a “popular construct in new media” (Manovich 2001, 268). He borrowed the concept of *flânerie* from Walter Benjamin and Charles Baudelaire, who described the “*flâneur*” as “the new modern male urban subject”. As Manovich writes:

An anonymous observer, the *flâneur* navigates through the space of a Parisian crowd, mentally recording and immediately erasing the faces and figures of passersby. From time to time, his gaze meets the gaze of a passing woman, engaging her in a split-second virtual affair, only to be unfaithful to her with the next female passerby. (Manovich 2001, 268f.)

The quote of course expresses a tremendously male gaze. But the concept of *flânerie* proves to be very fruitful for the discussion of *Pregoneros de Medellín*. The *flâneur* is described as someone who is part of the city, interacting with it and its movement while constantly searching (Manovich 2001, 268f.). Manovich transfers and translates this figure from the urban to the digital space. It is not a city this *flâneur* is moving through, but a database. Manovich continues

The navigable space is [...] a subjective space, its architecture responding to the subject’s movement and emotion. In the case of the *flâneur* moving through the physical city, this transformation of course, only happens in the *flâneur’s* perception, but in the case of navigation through a virtual space, the space can literally change, becoming a mirror of the user’s subjectivity. (Manovich 2001, 269)

It is thus not only the “simulation of movement through a physical space” that matters in navigable space, as this would, as Manovich puts it, “defeat[...] the computer’s new capabilities of data access and manipulation” (Manovich 2001, 275). “[S]uch operations as search, segmentation, hyperlinking, visualization, and data mining” are, according to Manovich, “more satisfying” than just the simple and simulated movement through space (Manovich 2001, 273). Instead of an overview page or spatial

6 For production-related reasons, this does not offer the same possibilities as Google Street View, such as a 360° image (Durand 2015).

montage as in *K-Town'92*, the database in *Pregoneros de Medellín* is organized in a way that tries to simulate physical space spread out on a map. In this way, it provides a surface for and gives coherence to the individual elements of the database. The database here, as is the case for all databases, is therefore not an “unstructured collection”, but a collection that is “ordered in particular ways to focus user attention and choice” (Nash 2022, 19). In this regard, I return to the game elements mentioned above, as they – and the visual interface that is created with them – are organizing factors in this database and provide what Manovich calls “search” or “data mining” functions, which is an “intrinsic motivation” as a result of the positive feedback that will result from it.

The use of game elements, appearing here in the “non-game context” of an interactive documentary, can thus be understood in terms of gamification (Deterding et al. 2011, 10). Such game elements can appear on five different levels: Game interface design patterns, game design patterns and mechanics, game design principles and heuristics, game models, and game design methods (Deterding et al. 2011, quoted in Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. 2007, 271). The elements of *Pregoneros de Medellín* I am concerned with can be found on only one of those levels: interface design. The interface of *Pregoneros de Medellín* includes an indication of which area the viewer is currently in, a display of stories discovered (from a total of fifteen), an expandable map with the displayed locations of the vendors, as well as a footer with five icons that are initially covered up. Behind these icons, there are also three icons for each vendor, which start out locked, each of which reveals an icon and one part of the vendor’s story.

The stories that can be discovered are here visualized multiple times, by a number and by icons on the map as well as in the footer. The map also contains a visualization of which streets the viewer has already visited. This display of discovered stories, and the unlocked icons of the stories watched, can be understood as a “score” or “points”, and therefore as the “ultimate device for keeping track of the game state” (Raczkowski 2014, 142). As there is no actual competition for the user, these points are generally “worthless”: There are no other players, no leaderboard and no time restraint that would serve as the basis for competition. These points and badges may therefore be an irrational goal, but even though they are “worthless” they are still a form of validation (Dignan, quoted in Raczkowski 2014, 67). With Niklas Schrape, we can say they signal “game progress, victory conditions” and “feedback”. Schrape further notes that points and badges can also create a sense of “group belonging”, serving additionally as positive feedback. This does not exist in the same way in *Pregoneros de Medellín*. The only group belonging viewers may feel is with the vendors. The topics discussed in the three clips per vendor become deeper and more personal with each clip. As the viewer progresses, therefore, they get a sense of growing closer and more intimate with the *pregoneros*.

Unlocking the vendors in the footer visualizes the viewer's achievement – i.e., their progress in the film – by means of changes in the interface. The mechanism resembles the assembling of a character inventory in a traditional game, but here it fulfills different tasks. Viewers do not assemble them to be used later. They do not serve any function, other than visualizing the viewer's progress in the film and allowing them to assess the length of the overall documentary. The unlocking animation of this feature provides viewers with positive feedback: They have achieved something – they did well! This is then used to further their curiosity. All the remaining locked icons on the interface are blank spaces to be filled. Each is intended to produce a feeling of dissatisfaction that can only be satisfied by completing the next task – i.e., finding and watching all the stories. It is a search for the sake of the search.

Here it is also worth mentioning that the aesthetic of this inventory-like visual interface suggests a challenge for the viewers. At the same time, the film tries to avoid giving viewers a sense that they have failed – and the accompanying negative feedback – as much as possible. All the vendors are indicated on the map, and by clicking on the respective icons it is possible to jump directly to them. Finding the vendors is therefore not a very complicated task. Furthermore, no matter where on the map the vendors are found, the three videos will be played in the same order. It thus becomes quite apparent that these game elements do not really have a functional role, but rather a symbolic one. It is through them that searching and data-mining take place – operations that for Lev Manovich constitute the *flânerie* in the database.

The knowledge produced in *Pregoneros de Medellín* is – something that is inherent to simulations – based on the performance of the viewers and is therefore, to a certain point, embodied. They scroll through the city, decide which street to follow, where to stop; they decide which vendors to get to know. In doing so, they encounter an elaborate soundscape that includes geo-spatialized sounds of the chants and songs of the vendors, which get louder and louder as they move closer to them. What the viewers see, how fast they are moving, and what they listen to in the elaborate soundscape of the documentary is to a certain point determined by their choices. It is a performance supported by a database, here presented in the form of a microworld that visualizes its own fragmentation by allowing the viewers to identify the elements that constitute the database.

However, in *Pregoneros de Medellín*, this performance via the database is subject to evaluation. This evaluation takes place by means of the game elements detailed above, which make changes in the visual interface, as well as other strategies employed to encourage viewers to keep looking, keep scrolling, and keep watching the stories until they have seen them all. This is exemplified by a pop-up message that will appear once the viewer has seen and discovered the first story: “One video is not enough to know all the facets of Jale! There's more! Look for her in other streets.” There will be no actual negative feedback if the film is not watched until the end. But

there will be a lack of positive feedback. By watching all the content, a viewing experience that the film affords, the viewer is led to understand that they know “all the facets” of each vendor.⁷

Conclusion

Taking Nash’s idea of the database voice as an entry point for my engagement with knowledge-making in these two interactive documentaries, we have encountered two examples that do, in theory, not differ much in their approaches, but nevertheless end up at different results. Both films are built around databases and structure the elements in the database via a visual interface. Both films provide overviews of all the content in their database in some shape or form. But in one case, the experience of and movement through the database is structured by an obscurity and lack of transparency, while in the other it is structured by clarity. *K-Town’92*’s database narrative constitutes a knowledge-making that focuses on “contingencies, alternatives, and the process of construction” rather than “inevitability, completeness [and] singularity” (Nash 2022, 18). It is a “what-if” mode of knowledge-making (using the term Uricchio applies to simulations) that results in statements being constantly undermined by their visualized fragmentation. The idea is to never arrive at a point of satisfaction or to create a feeling of “knowing everything there is”. *Pregoneros de Medellín* exhibits the structures that Nash highlights as potentially creating such open, fragmented forms. However, the fact that the database narrative here is heavily structured by its gamified character demonstrates an understanding of documentary knowledge-making that is self-contained, fixable, and complete. One that – reflecting a “Gotta Catch ‘Em All” rhetoric – presents knowledge as something that can be captured and accurately represented in its entirety – which is framed here as something to be achieved.

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7 Viewers can also create an account that will save their progress, allowing them to complete the film over multiple sessions.

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