

Hidden value in remixed and convergent media in the applied arts and design

Peter Thiedeke

Griffith University

07 373 53170

p.thiedeke@griffith.edu.au

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Photography, design and music have been irreversibly affected by the digital revolution. Creative practitioners and organisations face great challenges as posed by globalisation, crowd-sourced content, stock libraries, locative media, the sharing economy and the creative commons. In terms of creative industry and social capital, the rise of new media, the siren servers Google and Facebook (Lanier 2013), and the seemingly endless cycles of creative destruction are often perceived as culpable for the degradation of their economic value.

How can this be conceptually reverse-engineered to add value through professional creative practices that embrace those very parameters?

This paper evaluates of an integrated advertising campaign, *Keep It Local*, that employs disruptive parameters as a model for adding creative value. The paper is founded on industrial, interdisciplinary practice-led research and the theoretical discourse of new media (Manovich 2001), convergent culture (Jenkins 2014), remix culture (Navas 2012), the sharing economy (Gobble 2017), and photography. If measured by traditionally accepted understandings of value, such as economic impact and audience engagement, the campaign could be determined as either a success or failure. However, as a model that re-frames shared value in art and design research and aesthetics, it offers insights into unconventional modes of professional creative practice that serve to expand the discourse in these fields and affect approaches to education in the creative arts.

Biography

Peter Thiedeke works internationally as a photographer, creative director and researcher. His practice-based research is in the fields of still and moving imagery, and since 1995, he has worked with advertising agencies, digital agencies, publishers, record companies, designers, web developers, architects, collectives, universities, galleries and museums on projects in London, Paris, New York, Sydney, Melbourne,

Brisbane and Buenos Aires. Peter lectures at the Queensland College of Art (QCA) delivering courses to the Fine Art, Photography, Design and Bachelor of Interactive and Creative Media programs. He holds a Bachelor of Visual Arts, an MA in Interactive Digital Media and is currently a PhD candidate at the QCA.

Introduction

This paper critically evaluates an integrated advertising campaign. What began as just another commission, another advertisement, ended quite differently. Considered as research, it has become an exploration of some of the challenges faced by the current and emerging generation of applied artists and designers. As a case study which includes how and why the project was made in terms of the strategy, conceptual development and the production process, the image acts as a vehicle of digital economies as it captures and disseminates big data. However, my interpretation of value is demonstrated by the fusion of the act of making with the discourses of remix theory, convergence culture, locative media and the idea of value in the digital and sharing economies.

Strategy and the rhetoric of sharing

The purpose of the campaign was to launch the new Localsearch app. With its origins as a phonebook-like services directory, Localsearch is now a software service that specialises in capturing and sharing the details of the smaller businesses and independent operators that often remain invisible to search engines such as Google. These smaller businesses, with lesser computational resources, can be somewhat isolated from the elite computer networks and aggregators such as Facebook. These super-networks, described by Jaron Lanier (2013) as siren servers, entice the unsuspecting smaller entities and extract concentrated wealth and productivity from them by drawing them deeper into the informational and 'informal economy of barter and reputation' (Lanier 2013, 52).

The complexity of modern media and technology ecosystems means that brands are now defined by the experiences that they create. The strategic message of the campaign, 'connecting communities through easily accessible local knowledge', was deliverable in a variety of ways to suit specific media technologies. Alongside that message, the Localsearch app itself and the collaborative process of the making of the

campaign were fused with the rhetoric of community, connectivity, sharing and belonging. These almost utopian ideals have become somewhat meaningless through the proliferation of digital economy rhetoric and their overuse in advertising, branding, online virtual communities, social media platforms and web forums. In effect, the concept of the digital and sharing economies now have such a multiplicity of meanings – among them peer-to-peer; on demand; platform economies; and access economies – and are diluted to such an extent that they no longer hold much significance. True sharing may not actually be viable as a business model, particularly where enterprises are built on the distribution of costs and the re-use of assets, and where the structures of such companies are often designed to elude labour and legal liabilities and employment obligations such as taxes, health insurances, holiday pay and various compensations and are, in all respects, motivated by profit (Gobble 2017, 60). The mythical use of the word ‘sharing’, amplified by marketeers and synonymous with the Uber-esque technology companies and start-ups, is rarely built upon actual sharing but could be more accurately described as crowd-based capitalism, ‘a new organisation of the economic activity that affects the way we feel connected to each other’ (Sundararajan 2016, 1). Because of the ever evolving and ambiguous nature of the sharing economy, the ubiquitous nature of cloud computing and the creative commons, an abundance of source imagery is available from an increasingly crowded market. In the digital space, these assets are highly malleable and easily downloaded for use by advertisers.

Locative media, the aesthetics of remix and an experience of converged media

The conceptual treatment of the Keep It Local advertising campaign attempted to solve the problem of simultaneously representing many regional Australian towns in a way that is generic and aesthetically transferrable across many regions. Remix, innate to mass online cultural production and adopted as the production model for the campaign, is ‘a disruptive and efficient form of information exchange and plays a vital role in mass communication’ (Navas 2012, 66). As a material reality dependent on the constant recyclability of material, remix questions the role of the individual as genius and sole creator. Tropes of the street, common to representations of many regional towns – the details of cafés, shops, parks and the main street – are intermittently juxtaposed against identifiable landmarks that are specific to particular locations. Using a new media technology called Dataclay, offline video editing is automatable and the malleable imagery was adapted to represent a specific region or town centre (Figures 1 and 2).

Through locative media technologies, the imagery is personalised and delivered online to suit the specific location of the viewer. The Stockton Bridge, as viewed by a user in Newcastle (Figure 3), is replaced by the seashore of Townsville (Figure 4). As the user transcends real geographies, their experience becomes one of adaptive virtual geographies. A power shift is at play; 'Increasingly this convenient adaptation, or the personalisation of space, can be considered as an exclusionary practice that not only challenges how spaces are perceived and experienced but also who might have access to those experiences as mediated by technologies' (Gordon 2011, 134).



Figures 1 and 2. Still images extracted from the adaptive Keep It Local video files, made using Dataclay software, showing different location data dependent upon the user location. A search for florists in Newcastle (left) and Taree (right), 2016 (Guerrilla Digital).



Figure 3 and 4. Adaptive media insertions showing the iconic Stockton Bridge in the background for users in Newcastle (left) and coastal features for users in the Townsville region (right), 2016. (Guerrilla Digital).

The campaign's protagonist, a local lad with local knowledge, is on a mission to win over the girl of his dreams and cycles through town towards his destiny, connecting with his community along the way. His virtual world is constructed from a m lange of media that

is rendered on dynamic LED screens as responsive, interactive, still and moving imagery delivered in the form of looping web banners, bus sidings, ad shells, billboards and on the screens of regional and rural Australian television sets. Evermore connected to a seemingly infinite network, a geo-tagged node among many, he navigates a GPS-enabled world of big data. He represents our very hopes and anxieties. On one hand, the ubiquitous networks and devices have liberated us from the limitations of physical space. On the other hand, 'as space becomes increasingly virtualised, our increasing dependency on these networks could leave us placeless' (Gordon 2011, 40). Ironically, the anxiety of being disconnected and left invisible to the networks may prove to be an even greater source of angst than that of being under a constant Orwellian surveillance (Gordon 2011, 133).

Informed by the aesthetics of a location-based ICT or app, many of the characters and much of the *mise-en-scène* were made from readymade downloads, discrete and disparate representations of the real world, including photography, video, vector graphics, digital illustrations and animation. Re-constructed both online and offline, the hybridity of the work was collaboratively conceived of, designed, composited and remixed and the formation of a composite new media species was underway (Manovich 2013, 337). The crowd-sourced content was adapted into a cohesive and nostalgic, if not clichéd, silhouette-on-sunset aesthetic that iconographically represents multiple regional centres of Australia. The convergence of media and the appropriation of the visual languages of cinema, motion graphics and visual effects embrace the meta-language of the digital and reveals 'the photographic as a subgenre of both the graphic and painting' (Manovich 2001, 295). Lens-based captured realities and computer-generated virtual realities are fused, disciplinary boundaries and genre are transcended and mediums expanded. The work's form and content were further transformed as they were collaboratively and deeply remixed through the real-time online tele-presence platform Skype (Figure 5).

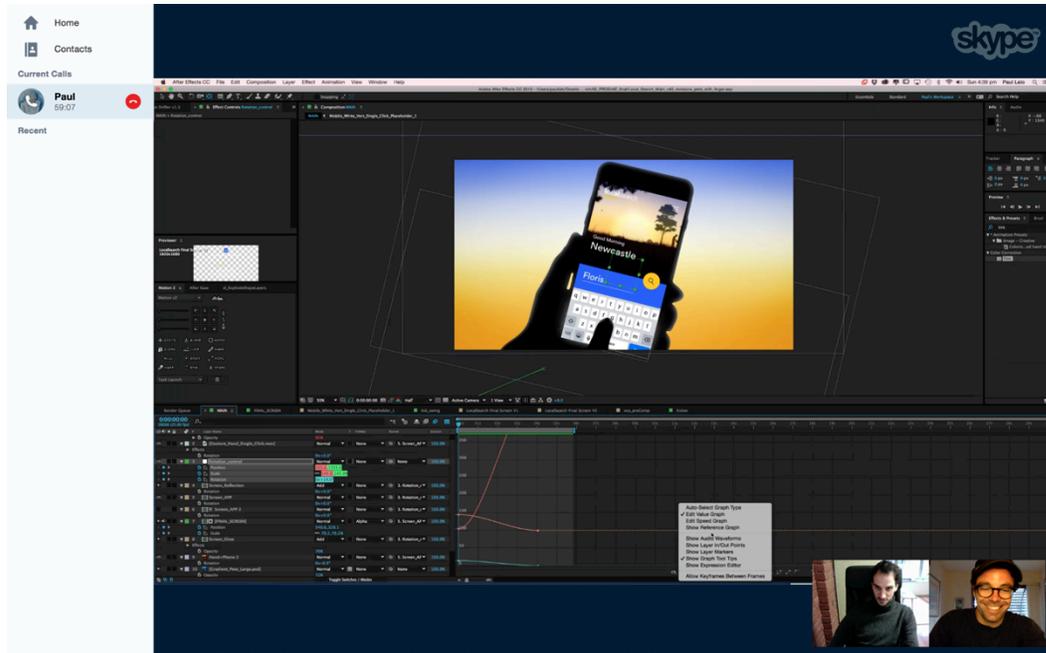


Figure 5. A screen grab of the collaborative production process using After Effects through the tele-presence communication platform Skype, 2016 (Peter Thiedeke).

The interactive video project management platform Frame.io (Figure 6) facilitated further critique from clients and agency stakeholders. This cyclic feedback is often referred to as a tissue meeting. Sir John Hegarty (2011), of advertising giants Bartle Bogle Hegarty, marks the introduction of the enduring tissue meeting as an affront to creativity. At best, the tissue meeting is the sharing of a number of creative routes with the client. At worst, it is the granting of creative control to the client and a process of corralling creativity in the name of streamlining and deriving formulas to predict the unpredictable. 'Process is trying to make order out of chaos. Creativity is trying to make chaos to create order. They are at opposite ends of a spectrum', wrote Hegarty (2011, 28). These virtual tissue meetings, and the deeper interactions between those involved in the making and the re-making and the content and the working methods, clearly led to more profound levels of hybridisation. Collective and generative approaches through multiple software interfaces (Figure 7) reveal the complexity of the relationship of form and content, where they merge into one entity and the 'unfinalisable meaning-making processes that enable cultures to be cultures' (Irvine 2014, 33). Along with the democratisation of digital disruption, this may have marked the beginning of the end, or the creative destruction of the 20th century hegemonic models of advertising and agency.

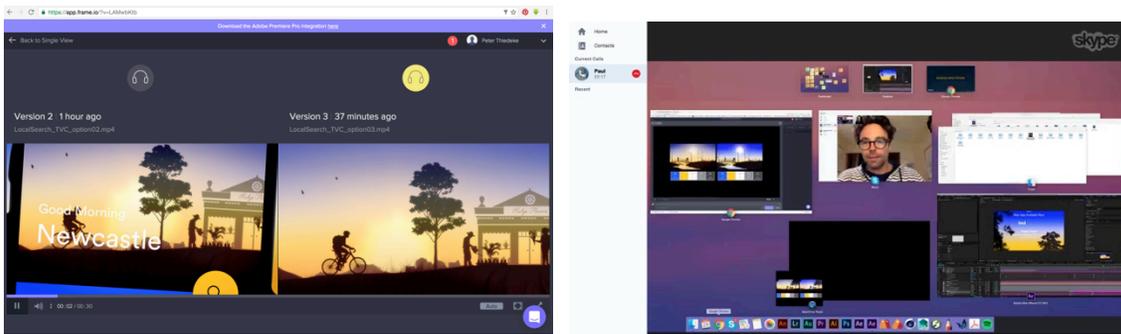


Figure 6 and 7. A screen grab of the Frame.io interface (left) and the real-time sharing of work spaces including Google Chrome, QuickTime, After Effects and Skype (right) 2016, (Peter Thiedeke).

Hidden value

The project was delivered to Localsearch in an open format, including all of the itemised source files in a fully editable timeline, ready for further remixing. This extreme adaptation, or reverse-engineering, of the tissue meeting might seem peculiar to most people working in advertising and is certainly an unusual practice from an agency point of view. The creative control over any future re-iterations and the economic gains of the associated billable hours were, in this case, forfeited and the usual risk-mitigation strategies of not exposing the work to the misrecognitions of newly appointed or self-appointed authors – in many cases the client – were also un-ritualistically abandoned. Referring to Pierre Bourdieu's (1991) notion of collective misrecognition, Irvine (2014) expresses the idea that we are continually socialised into maintaining ways of preserving the misrecognition of itemisable sources, authors, origins, works, and derivations. He infers a need to break the cycles of misrecognition towards a more useful base for the description and conceptual analysis of remix. He argues that we cannot account for how and why remix, as an explicit combinatorial form of expression, is as recurrent, meaningful, and prominent as it is by merely describing observable, superficial features (Irvine 2014,17).

After the agency's handover of the project to the client, selective remixes have emerged and new characters and elements, such as a mechanic's garage (Figure 8) and CC's Plumbing (Figure 9), proliferate the visual language of the original source material.



Figure 8 and 9. Single frames from an HD video showing remixes with the mechanic's garage (left) and CC's Plumbing van (right) as additional narrative elements. (Author/s unknown, Localsearch, 2016)

At first glance, this introduction of new elements is presumably a response to a perceived omission in the Keep It Local narrative. It might be that this represents a desire to establish a new node within the Localsearch virtual community that might one day manifest in the real world, willed into existence through hyper-connectivity. Through an examination of Roland Barthes' *The Death of the Author* (1968) and Michel Foucault's *What Is an Author?* (1969), Navas posits that the author functions as a cultural variable. He cites Barthes' notions that one day the author or the author's function will disappear and Foucault's notions of authorship, which includes everything that an author has written and which can only pretend to function autonomously. Navas exposes a 'tendency to reconsider creativity not as an individual act, but a collective one, where the author introduces an idea that the reader can complete by questioning, endorsing, or extending as part of her own opinions' (Navas 2012, 134).

The apparition of these remixes may simply be the expression of a desire for participation, a creative gesture to stimulate further combinatorial dialogue. Offering the genre of jazz as an exemplary form of practiced dialogism, Irvine (2014) urges that there is a need to link expressions in one particular genre to new expressions in others, and argues a logic for describing remix and hybrid works in terms of diverse cultural genres (Irvine 2014, 28). Electing street art as another exemplary form of generative, combinatorial creativity and as an arena for ever-renewable expression, Irvine proposes that urban locations motivate interpretive remixes with their abundant source material and that contemporary street artists have developed exemplary ways to follow deep

remix principles by working intuitively and heuristically to create hybrid forms as nodes in new networks of meaning (Irvine 2014, 32).

From the compromise of the tissue meetings to the unpredictability of the remix, the implication of relinquishing creative control would completely change advertising. In 2006 Henry Jenkins declared that consumers, categorised as networked collectives of people, had not only taken advantage of the shifting economic trends and the affordances of new media to appropriate and re-articulate media content, but had re-shaped the cultural production of media as a do-it-yourself culture (Jenkins 2006, 135-136). Jenkins' supposition, that these active modes of democratic and interactive spectatorship favour the horizontal integration of media conglomerates and encourage the flow of images, ideas and narratives across multiple media channels, would take the pre-digital industrial media monopolies and control mechanisms and extrude them as the dizzying multiplicities of today. Jenkins later re-iterated in 2013 that he had viewed this as an excess of digital revolution rhetoric and that the assumption that we are moving towards liberation through improved media technologies is overly biased by technologically determinist thinking and could be described as a discourse of inevitability (Jenkins 2014, 274).

Conclusion

Progressively each generation is empowered in ways previously unrecognised. We are enabled with the potential to close the gaps between the controlled authorship of closed professional networks and the interchange of the open networks such as the academic, the amateur and the DIY. One might reconsider the disruptive forces beyond the rhetoric of the digital revolution and technologically determinist discourses of inevitability, and re-frame them as creative opportunities. For the visual artist, value and meaning are found through creation, the rewards of open dialogues and the exploration of shared practices, whether they be in common software environments, tangibly in the studio, or physically within our communities.

Certainly, software and digital communications platforms serve us well, and the convenience, speed and closure of spatial distance and temporal latency have endless potential. On closer inspection of the idea of value in the digital and sharing economies, there is little doubt about the ironic implications. Aligning automation and the aggregation

of data with concepts such as personalisation and sharing exacerbates the anxiety of being disconnected from the digital networks. Considering the rhetoric of sharing and the new capitalist strategies for extracting wealth from the digital economy, it pays to be mindful of linguistic trends and buzzwords that may subvert altruism in the pursuit of economic growth. Interacting with communities that are only virtual may reveal the significant discrepancies that exist between the act of creation, the passivity of consumption and what is fashionably referred to as digital experience.

History has shown that unconventional modes for creative and professional practice do become conventional and, given time, proliferate as heuristic functions. So too does the confidence in, and acceptance of, those practices and a given medium may expand and grow. When a critique of observable superficial features gives way to symbolic values such as empathy which is bound by the process of collaborative making, new combinatorial forms of expression become real alternatives to vertiginous top-down tissue meetings. Concepts such as creative control and creative briefs that try to make order out of chaos, may fluidly evolve into a jazz-like lateral integration, where chaos creates order and the participatory, collective, and endlessly variable forms of cultural agency might just become the functions of authorship.

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