CHAPTER 22

WHOSE LINE IS IT ANYWAY?
ENABLING CREATIVE APPROPRIATION OF TELEVISION

1. INTRODUCTION

“Live long and prosper” and “beam me up” are popular quotes from the Star Trek television series. Quoting television can be considered a form of media appropriation. If people are given the ability to manipulate video clips of television directly will they construct their own media works? A software tool called talkTV provides this form of access by chunking television into video clips of dialogue that can be re-sequenced. An evaluation of this software tool occurred with Star Trek fans at an annual science fiction convention. The exploratory findings of this study suggest that if given access and the ability to re-purpose television, people enjoy constructing short fan films.

1.1 Television fans as producers

Television shows come as packaged entertainment: well-assembled stories, professional actors, and soundtracks all fitted together. They are generally designed as passive entertainment. The audience might discuss the show around the water cooler or online, but for the most part the audience is intended to consume television.

Not content with just watching their favourite shows, television fans have a history of producing their own fictional stories. Fans of the Star Trek television series are the most well known for constructing original fictions derived from the show (Jenkins, 1992). Some fans’ short films involve appropriating soundtracks, sound effects, costumes, and digital star ship models. Music videos are another format for fan appropriation in which video clips from the show are re-edited to music so as to create new meanings dictated by the chosen song (Jenkins, 1992). These activities fall under the banner of “fan fiction”, which is replete with its own sub-genres such as slash fiction, erotic stories between two characters separated by a / in the title (such as Kirk/Spock romances) (Jenkins, 1992). Fans create meanings separate from those intended by the producers of the television series. In this way, they claim ownership of media by integrating it into their own creations.
Not all fans have the time or skills to easily create their own films. How can people’s media appropriation be facilitated? As a research problem, the construction of fan movies was conceptualised in terms of its component parts. Our intuition is that television dialogue is a well-established way of appropriating media – people quote television shows often – so that with access to source material, fans could easily construct films. talkTV is a software tool designed to search television clips via dialogue. Our testing of this application among a group of Star Trek fans reveals useful insights into how fans appropriate media. Our work is a contribution toward a future in which this activity might be commonplace (Davis, 1997) and possibly automated (Sack & Davis, 1994).

1.2 Engineering

Dialogue is encoded into most television broadcasts as subtitled Closed Captions (CC), providing a ready index into a television show from which to segment video clips. talkTV requires fans to enter a text query into a database of television programs that retrieves video clips in which the queried words are spoken. For example, a search for “warp factor” retrieves clips in which characters speak these words. talkTV’s database consists of four seasons of Star Trek: The Next Generation, providing about 100 hours of searchable dialogue. The tool also allows fans to create title slides by superimposing text over selected background videos. The backgrounds were pre-selected to provide different establishing shots featuring the star ship.

Figure 1. The talkTV user interface. On the left are the search results in the form of video thumbnails. Clips are dragged to the storyboard panel on the right.