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Videotheque : Past, Present, and Future

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Videotheque: Past, Present, and Future

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1. Present: What is the “Videotheque”?

The Videotheque is the video library system in the National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka’s (hereinafter “Minpaku”) exhibition hall (Photo 1). Visitors can choose from and watch over 700 videos about different cultures around the world. We developed the Videotheque system to illustrate with video things that cannot be sufficiently described with object exhibits alone, such as festivals, performing arts, ceremonies, how people live, how tools are used, and their backgrounds.

Replaced in the spring of 2012, the current Videotheque consists of 28 booths in total, including 22 two-person booths, 3 six-person booths, and 3 new experimental booths based on the concept of a “universal museum.” The new booths designed with an open format have moveable stools and allow people in wheelchairs to watch the videos while seated in their wheelchair. The Multifunctional Terminal Room contains five Videotheque terminals with mice and keyboards and five terminals installed in front of couches where visitors can relax and watch longer programs.

The Videotheque offers three types of content. As of September 2017, the system features 598 “short programs” that are 15 to 20 minutes long, 121 comparatively longer “research programs” that are research data or results, and 48 “multimedia programs” that combine several videos with photographs, maps, and text in which visitors can select



Photo 1 The Videotheque booths in Minpaku’s exhibition hall (Image by the author, July, 2019)

what they want to view in accordance with their interests. Users can navigate the menu with a touch screen and select the programs they want to see based on region or theme.

The current Videotheque is a stand-alone system. Programs are sent to individual terminals from a server beforehand and saved on each terminal's hard drive. Thus, even if several terminals break down, videos can still be watched on the other terminals with no problem.

2. Past: Origins of the Videotheque

Minpaku's Videotheque system has a long history, dating back to 1977 when the museum first opened with it available in the exhibition hall.

Tadao Umesao, Minpaku's first director-general, was the originator of the Videotheque. As a new museum, the size of Minpaku's collection was no match for that of the museums in Europe and the United States. Therefore, Umesao came up with an idea to provide unique services that no other museums could offer by combining the areas in which Japan excelled at the time—imaging technology, electronics, and robotics.

Umesao called his concept for the Videotheque “reverse TV.” On a TV, a TV station broadcasts specific programs at specific times, which many people watch simultaneously. In contrast, the Videotheque would enable individuals to choose what they wanted to watch from a wide range of programs and watch them whenever they wanted. He wanted to offer this service to visitors in the exhibition hall. In other words, it was what we call today a “video on demand” system. Video on demand systems, which include video-sharing websites, are ubiquitous today, but a completely automated system that could provide a function like this without human intervention was groundbreaking at the time.

There was another purpose for the Videotheque—we wanted to make the exhibition hall a quiet space for dialogue between visitors and objects excluding exhibits that light up or move (i.e., videos). We created a clear separation between object exhibits and videos, giving the Videotheque the role of showing videos to visitors.

Since then, we have replaced the system four times in the last 40 years. Each time, we improved the system in accordance with the latest technological advances (Table 1). We changed the storage media for videos from U-matic 3/4-inch video cassettes to PC hard disks, the format of videos from NTSC analog to high-definition digital, and the user interface from a program catalog and numeric keypad to a touch screen. We also discontinued the program catalog. Of course, now videos can be rewound, fast-forwarded, and paused. Unfortunately, nothing remains of the first-generation system except for the program catalogs.

3. Future: What's Next for the Videotheque

What does the future hold for the Videotheque? Unfortunately, we have not been able to come up with a clear answer yet. However, there are at least two points that need to be considered.

The first is changes in the style of watching videos. Today, in the age of the Internet

Table 1 Development History of the Videotheque System, as of 2018

Generation	Service started	Video storage media	User interface	Other features
1st (when Minpaku opened)	1977	U-matic 3/4-inch video cassette	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Numeric keypad • Program catalog • Use card 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Robotic arm • Conveyor belt • Separate system for music and language • Seat sensor
2nd	1989	Optical disk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Touch screen • Use card 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Robotic arm • (Scene search function)
3rd	2000	Hard disk on server	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Track ball • Numeric keypad • Rewind, fast-forward, pause • Use card 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital video • Multimedia programs • Robotic arm discontinued • Minpaku database can be retrieved in the Multifunctional Terminal Room
4th	2006	Hard disk on individual computers in booths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Track ball • Numeric keypad • Rewind, fast-forward, pause • Use card discontinued 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stand-alone system • Recommends related programs • Questionnaire • Seat sensor discontinued
5th (current)	2012	Hard disk on individual computers in booths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Touch screen • Rewind, fast-forward, pause • Program catalog discontinued 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stand-alone system • High-definition video • Recommends related programs • Questionnaire • Booth interior and wiring renovated • Trial to universal design

and mobile devices, anyone can watch videos whenever and wherever they want. Some say that the days of watching videos in a booth are in the past. Wherever you go, even on the train station platform and on the commuter train, you see people intently rubbing their smartphone screens with their fingers. Smartphones have become something of a sixth sense for people. Regardless of what we may think about this trend, Minpaku should not ignore it. Perhaps we should actively provide information on Minpaku exhibits, including the videos in the Videotheque, to visitors' mobile devices. The time has come to seriously consider streaming videos on a website for which access is limited to specific users.

The other point is in regard to the content of the videos we provide. Several years ago, we conducted an analysis of the Videotheque user log. We found that, with the exception of multimedia programs, the average viewing time per program was five to six minutes. In one-third of all viewings, viewers watch programs for less than one minute. Meanwhile, we also found that in one-fifth of all viewings, viewers watch 95% or more of an entire program (Figure 1). Minpaku researchers who make the videos often try to pack as much information as possible into one program. However, looking from the visitor's perspective, perhaps we should first provide shorter videos that can hold the viewer's interest with a brief introduction to the culture of the region. Perhaps we should also create a separate environment where visitors can relax and concentrate on longer, more advanced programs.

Minpaku is under pressure to transform the Videotheque from system-centric to

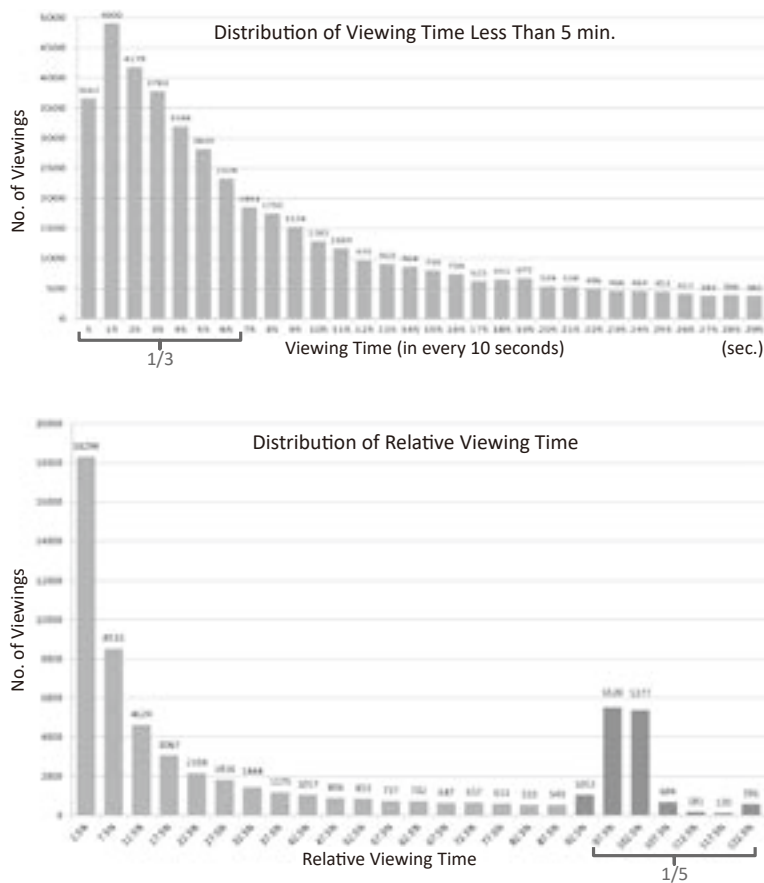


Figure 1 Viewing Time of the Videotheque Programs in FY2012 (Kaneda 2013: 3)

content-centric. In the near future, the word “Videotheque” (and the system) may disappear from Minpaku. However, even if the method of providing the videos changes, the fact that the videos (i.e., contents) we have made over many years are an important asset to Minpaku will not.

Reference

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