

Journey to the Center of a Vlog: One Woman's Exploration of the Genre of Video Blogs

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In a webtext comprised of a collection of videos, Grice discusses her journey from uninformed, sporadic vlog watcher to novice vlog author through practice, theoretical research, and conversations with others both inside and outside of the vlogging community. She uses Cultural Historical Activity Theory and genre studies, especially an analysis of the antecedent genres of vlogs, in order to discover how our society's values and expectations help shape the conventions of the genre. The brief overview that appears here in print is only a supplement to the webtext, available at <http://www.youtube.com/user/kmgrice84>.

Why Vlogs?

I've always been a fan of things that make me laugh. Humor is definitely the key to my heart. So whenever one of my friends would post a link to a hilarious video on my Facebook wall, I wouldn't hesitate to click on the link and follow my computer to my own private comedy club in the privacy of my own home. Occasionally these videos would be a part of something much larger, a full collection of videos put out by an author on a central idea or theme. I would find myself losing hours of the day watching video after video and becoming a follower of the author's work, posting his or her videos on my own wall and peddling them to my friends as if I were getting paid on commission to spread the author's video empire.

The power this genre had over me (as well as thousands of other viewers), without even realizing what that genre was fascinated me. I decided to attempt to demystify this genre by discovering more about it. As I'm one of those hands-on learners who never really grasps a concept until I dive in and do it myself, I thought the best way to understand the "Wonderful Wizard of Vlogs" was to take a peek behind the curtain myself and make my own. After all, I thought, how hard could posting a few videos *be*? Point, shoot, share, right?

Project VLOG

I started my journey with research. I read about vlogs and watched hours of videos online. All of this gave me the confidence I needed to just jump right in. So, I picked up my video recorder, turned it on, and realized very quickly that I had no idea what I was doing. From that point on, I started to understand what it meant to really use my own vlog as a learning experience. Each time I tried to mimic what I was seeing in another author's vlog, I realized the extra training I needed. I needed to learn video editing techniques, scripting, staging, and online video sharing programs. Because of this hands-on learning process, it's easy to see a marked difference in the quality of my videos as they go.

With each video I started to learn more skills of vlog production, but what I feel was more important for my project was the identity my vlog began to develop. My mental picture of all vlogs was based on my shallow viewing habits: I thought they were all just funny video series and was having a hard time making my vlog fit into that identity. Was there room out there for a little informative/documentary vlog about one person's learning experience? After becoming a part of the vlogging community, I started having conversations with other authors of vlogs and talking about their experiences. Through them, I discovered a variety of vlogs, each unique in personality and topic. I found cosmetic tutorial vlogs, political affiliation vlogs, and personal diary style vlogs. Political vlogger Jonathan Barth made me see how the very nature of the online composing experience opens up the possibilities of the genre. An author can publish whatever kind of vlog she wants to, and somewhere out there in cyberspace there just might be an audience interested in that very same type of vlog.

The Nitty Gritty of Vlogs: Getting Acquainted with the Format of a Vlog

The vlog genre is a video evolution of the more textual blog. With a vlog, like its blog predecessor, an author records her ideas in video form, generally short in length, and posts them online in a central website location. While blogs generally use hosting sites like *Blogger*, vlogs can be created with any video hosting site like *YouTube*. An author creates a username and "channel" based on the type of vlog. The idea of posting continually on one's channel is to attract audiences who will subscribe to the channel like a magazine. As subscribers, these members will receive updates every time a change or post is made.

Since vlogs are structured around this regular, series style online publication, it often helps to watch vlog videos in order. If you're a newcomer to a vlog-in-progress (i.e., this vlog has been going for some time and has several videos you haven't seen), it helps to go to the beginning and get caught

up. Many vloggers will reference in their current videos comments or ideas they discussed in their previous videos, so a viewer could be missing out on some information by not watching them all. Fortunately for those viewers who don't have time to watch every video posted, most video posts are also structured to stand independently and discuss a separate idea.

Another convention of the vlogging genre is the interaction between author and audience through comment boxes and "like/dislike" buttons. Viewers can respond to ideas or questions posed by the author, share their opinion about the vlog with the author, request alterations to the vlog or specific topics for future videos, whatever they're compelled to do. These interactive qualities of the vlog make the text dynamic and adaptive, just like its technological medium. The vlog itself is shaped by the viewers' interactions with it, so in a way the audience plays a part in the authorship of the vlog.

For those viewers who aren't as familiar with the structure of a vlog, below you'll find a breakdown of the components of my own vlog to show you how to maneuver through my online webtext. When reaching a vlog's channel or home page, you might see something like Figure 1.¹

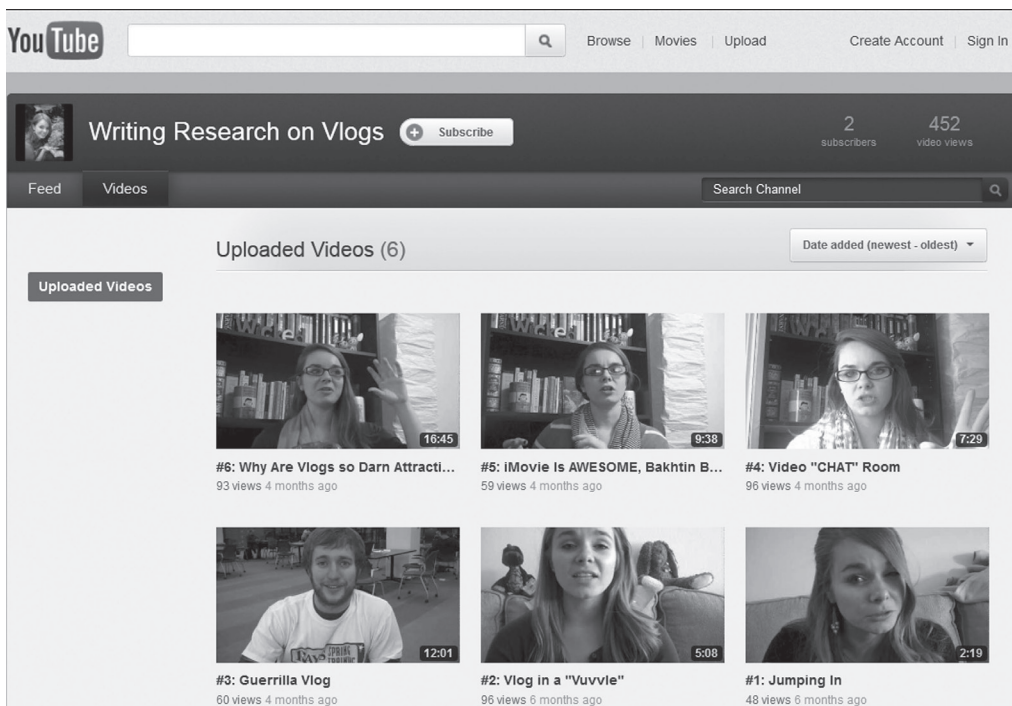


Figure 1: Welcoming Vlog Screen

This screen shows the title of the channel as well as all the author's uploaded videos in reverse chronological order. In order to watch a video, you'll need to move your cursor over the desired video thumbnail image and click.

After clicking on the chosen video, you'll be taken to a separate screen that will play the video and provide you with more information (see Figure 2). Above every video will be its specific title. Beneath it, you'll find the date it was posted, the number of times someone has viewed this specific video, and a short blurb explaining it. This lower information box, lovingly nicknamed a "doobly-doo" by vloggers Hank and John Green, is where the author can provide the audience with a summary of the video along with any other important information like sources or links. This information will be originally condensed due to screen space, so in order to see everything the author has written, you'll need to click the "Show more" tab.



Figure 2: Specific Video Screen

This screen is also where audience interaction occurs. If you would like to let the author know your thoughts on the video, you could "like" or "dislike" it by clicking on the thumbs up/thumbs down boxes. You can also provide very specific feedback and even ask the author questions by typing in the comment box below the doobly-doo (see Figure 3).

Drumroll, Please!

And now, I give you the fruits of my labor! Follow the link to my vlog, "Writing Research on Vlogs": <http://www.youtube.com/user/kmgrice84>.

The screenshot displays the top section of a YouTube video player. At the top, there are interaction buttons: 'Like' (thumbs up), 'Dislike' (thumbs down), 'Add to' (plus sign and dropdown arrow), 'Share', and a flag icon. To the right, it shows '70 views' and a small bar chart icon. Below these buttons, the video title is partially visible: 'Uploaded by kmgrice84 on Dec 12, 2011'. The video description reads: 'In this video, I reflect on some of the topics that were discussed in video #3 and respond to a message I received from an active vlogger who comments on his own participation in the vlogging community.' To the right of the description, it says '3 likes, 0 dislikes'. A 'Show more' button is centered below the description. Underneath, there is a section for 'All Comments (2)' with a 'see all' link on the right. A comment box is present with the text 'Sign In or Sign Up now to post a comment!'. Below the comment box, a comment is visible: 'Yes why not do a books on vlog type series? something like audio books but on a vlog format with possibly with types of cut aways or interaction. then I could say I have knowldge of a book that others maybe reading' by user 'iceman2434' posted '2 months ago'.

Figure 3: Comment Feature

Watch, comment, like or dislike if you want (since you are free as an audience of this genre to share your opinion), and subscribe!

Endnote

1. Genres that use technology are always changing to keep up with new inventions and trends. The screenshots and all of the instructions explaining the look and use of YouTube is subject to change over time. All of the information provided in this printed article is based on the YouTube channel design as of April 2012.

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Karly Marie Grice is an MA student specializing in Children's Literature at Illinois State University. She hopes to be able to use her degree in this as an excuse to never grow up, although growing "up" was out of the question for her as soon as she maxed out at 4'11.