

Keeping up with traditions during remote work

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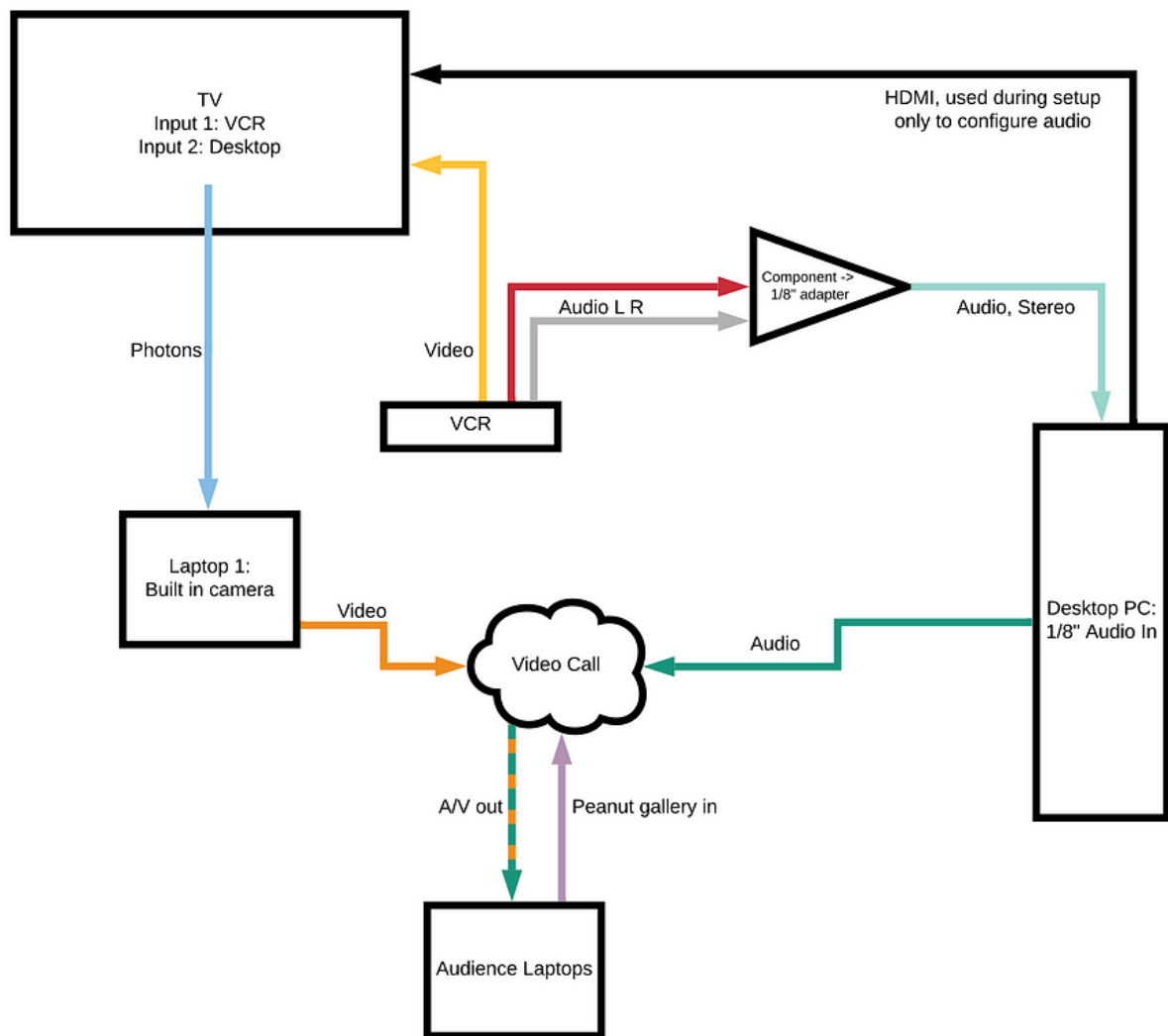
Every Tuesday, Klaviyo's VCR working group assembles in our office kitchen to watch the finest cinema on the finest video format. Our showings have been uninterrupted since we started last January: the only Tuesday we didn't show a movie was Christmas Eve. We've watched a range of classics, including Con Air, The Core, Blade, The Fugitive, and Battlefield Earth.

A few weeks ago, Klaviyo transitioned to work from home for all offices in response to COVID-19. As Klaviyo's longest running and most productive working group, we had to adapt to the changes required for remote VHS showings. Soon after the announcement, we started to brainstorm. Who had a VCR? Who had VHS tapes? Did we need a camcorder in the mix anywhere? How were we going to get RCA out connectors into modern A/V equipment? How much technology would it take to watch an antiquated VHS tape in a modern video call?

Because of my fanaticism for the non-remastered Star Wars Original Trilogy, I have a VCR and a small collection of VHS tapes in my apartment. From a previous A/V project, I also have the necessary adapter to change from L/R audio into "stereo" as the audio source.

However, there were some challenges to overcome. My company laptop is a MacBook, meaning a standard "Y" cable isn't detected as a microphone in the headphone jack. This meant I had to enlist my PC, which has separate headphone out and microphone in jacks, to receive and transmit the VCR's audio. However, the PC doesn't have a webcam, so we still needed the laptop to watch and send the visuals. Modern times call for two computers to watch a video format that's been around since 1976.

Since it's a little complicated, I created the following system diagram to show our remote VCR setup.



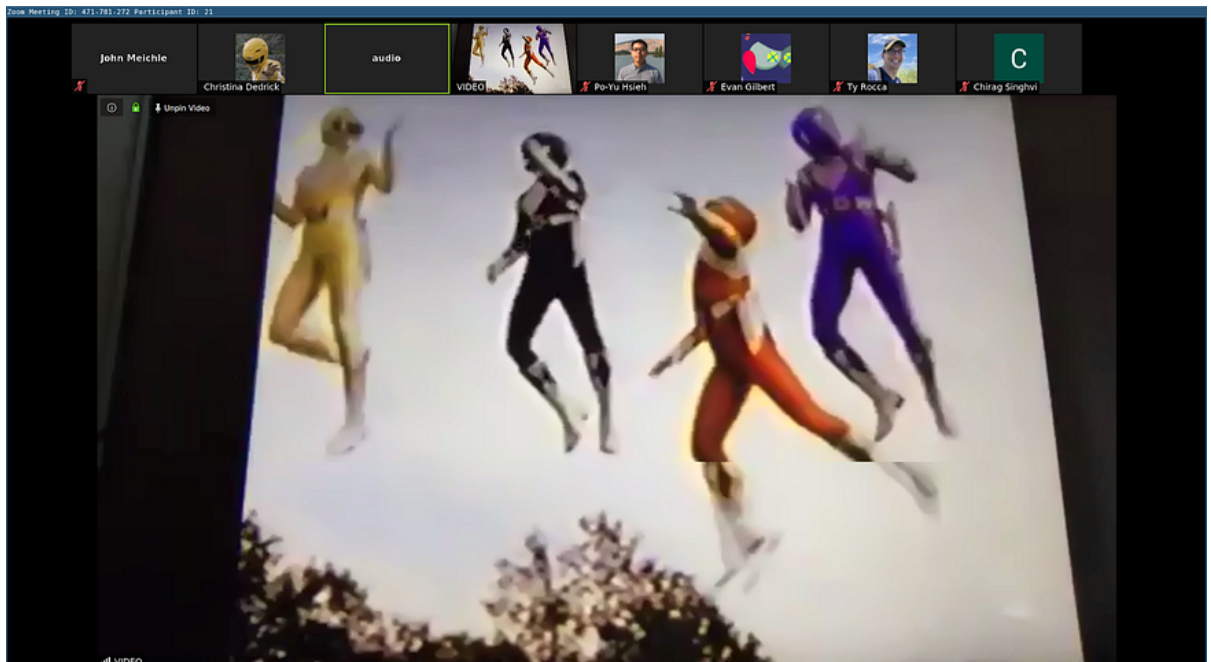
System Diagram of Remote VCR Setup

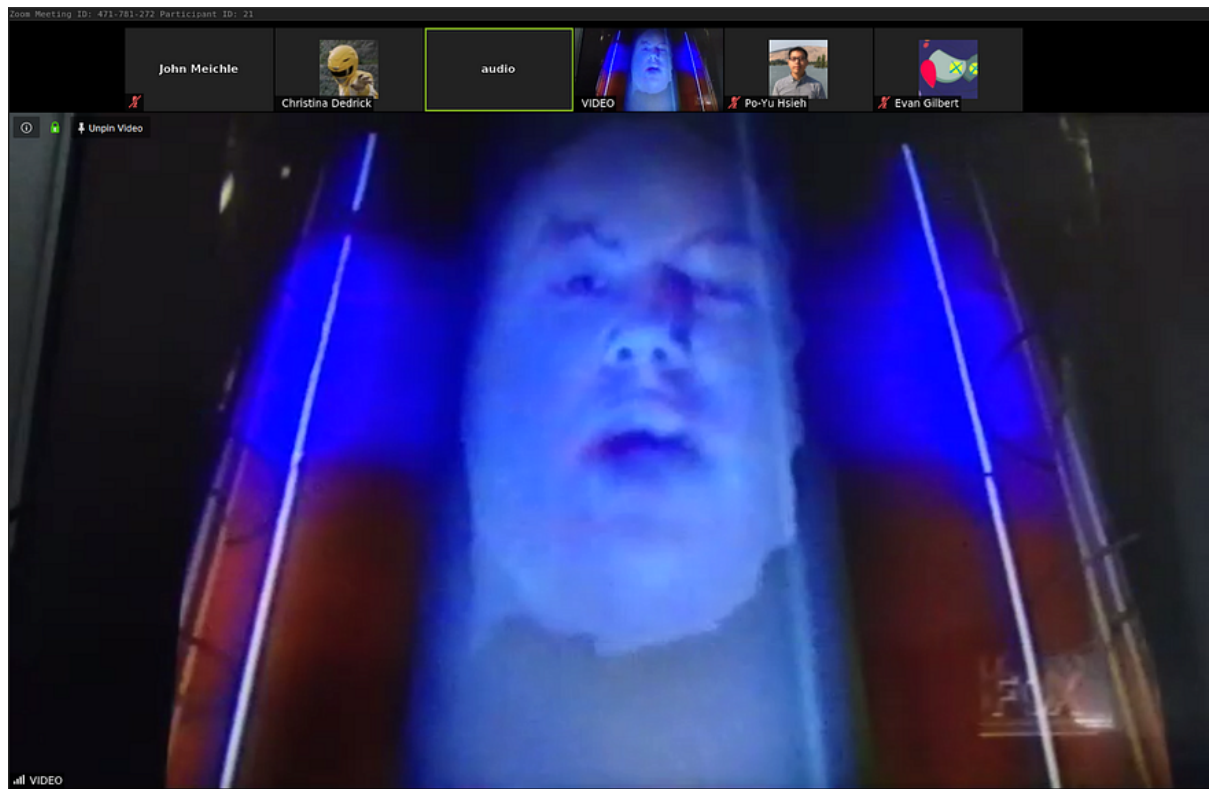
One of the things we discuss regularly at VCR Working Group is how to find an old tape with a TV recording of one of our favorite movies. Ideally, complete with commercials. While itâ€™s still relatively easy to buy most movies on VHS, most people donâ€™t consider a home tape with commercials valuable, so we couldnâ€™t find any for sale. Many of us remember having tapes like these from when we were kids, but all of our tapes have been lost to time. But, in assembling the remote collection of VHS tapes, I found a mysterious home video labeled MARIO. Could this be it? The Holy Grail? The Super Mario Bros. movie, recorded off TV, complete with all the original commercials? I couldnâ€™t wait to find out.



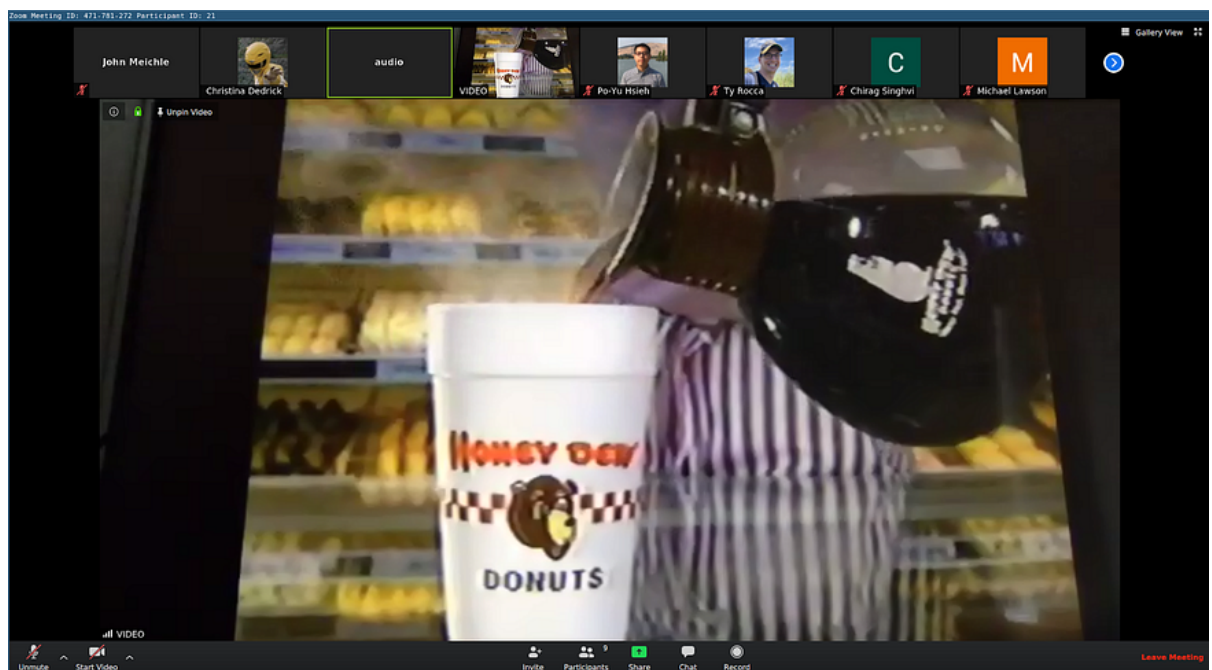
The mystery tape

It turns out it was actually 4.5 episodes of Power Rangers. However, the important thing was there, the commercials, dating the recording to approximately December of 1994. The tape was a top contender in our voting system, and was selected for our second week of remote showings. Hereâ€™s some audience screenshots from our screening:





And the commercials:





Continuing our working group during a period of remote work was completely feasible. From our showings so far, we have some key learnings and takeaways:

- Live demos are notoriously fraught with errors. Test your setup the night before the night before.
- Turn off the screen of the laptop watching the TV. This minimizes glare into the TV and creates a better user experience.
- Test the audio options, you may have the choice between direct input of the sound and auto volume adjust. Auto-adjust options are incredibly great at cutting out music, sound effects, and anything that isn't the actors voices. Direct in has a constant crackle of background noise. User interviews with your audience can help you pick between these two competing options.
- Agree on a place to keep the chatter so everyone can be part of the conversation. It's important stakeholders are not kept in the dark because memes need to be shared widely across the organization.

- Set strong but realistic VHS acquisition goals for your team. Our team orders VHS tapes faster than we can watch them, which means weâ€™re constantly struggling with our acquisition-to-screening SLO. Weâ€™re also approaching the point where we will need to come up with an indexing strategy for storing our tapes, which represents several tickets of feature work for our team.

Last of all, be kind and rewind!



The video capture laptop atop the VCR

