

Different Words for the Same Thing: Translating and Extending a Digital Collection

-or-

"It's Very Pretty, Mr Pope, But You Musn't Call It Homer"

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Regarding my translation and extension of the Open Video Digital Library Toolkit collection *Sustainable Searching*, it is important to note that the strategy which I developed was predicated on imparting as similar an *experience* in Scalar as possible, not necessarily presenting the same *information* (as in the case of the metadata fields) or the same *structure*. Rather than force Scalar into being something which it manifestly is not (a relational database), I tried to use the features that Scalar has in order to give the same overall impression of *Sustainable Searching* as a curated object. I think of my translation as idiomatic rather than exact: I tried to use Scalar's visual vocabulary to express the same concepts which came across in the OVDLT. Whether or not I succeeded is, of course, a matter of debate, but that was my ambition.

Throughout the process of translating my collection, there were a concepts which I wanted to preserve; compelling absence, destabilization, and the porousness of authority structures chief among them. I had on multiple occasions to restrain my competing impulses between making something which was overly helpful and one which was not merely recalcitrant, but overtly hostile to a reader: part of me insisted on making something which "worked," and another part was almost gleeful with the idea of constructing something deliberately "broken." It took some doing, channeling both inclinations, but I think that the tension between them helped me keep in mind the contradictions and questions on which this collection is built. I wanted to retain the frustration of efforts to use this object as a traditional information resource (and Scalar was my friend there; not being a relational database, it doesn't hold or deal with objects in anything like the same way) in a way which invited readers to question the authority and usefulness of the organizing structures in use.

After having spent time with the design brief and the collection in its native context, but well before feeling like I had a real hold on the collection, what it meant, or what I ought to do with it, I began playing with my tools. I needed to become familiar with how Scalar worked, what it could do, and what it wanted to do: Scalar presents itself as a book, so I tried to regard it as participating in the class of objects which we call books, and work to better understand its properties and how they could aid or hinder me in my quest. Pages it has by the score: the question became one of how to organize, arrange, and exploit those pages to both allow the reader a kind of access and to highlight the idea of the residual. Tables of contents and chapters are the most obvious control structures that books have. Another, less immediately obvious, is the signature (sections of pages held together); these four units, each composed of essentially the same material but serving different purposes, influenced my thinking throughout this project.

Taking into account the design brief for *Sustainable Searching* and my impressions of the collection, I sketched a strategy for mapping the design elements to Scalar. My basic criteria for what got into the translation was which elements showed the most "work" by the original curator, and which ones made an impression on me as a reader of that collection. If, either in my comparison of the collection to the original group of videos or in the design brief, it was obvious that conscious curatorial work had influenced an element, then it made the cut. Likewise, if an attribute stuck with me or I found it useful, interesting, challenging, or frustrating in my interactions with *Sustainable Searching* in the Open Video Digital Library Toolkit, I put it on the list of things to work out. On the debit side, anything which I did not particularly notice, the curator did not really address, or (and this is also important) was not strongly supported by Scalar (or was substantially burdensome to translate) I chose to exclude. Translation is a subjective process: this is me, stating my subjective position.

I elected to address the mechanical factors first, hoping that if I was successful in transcribing them, the less tangible facets of *Sustainable Searching* would follow. Beginning with first impressions, then, the basic navigation interface of the OVDLT is broken out into top tabs, a left sidebar containing categories, and a right bar with collections and playlists. Plainly, this was going to be a challenge to replicate in Scalar: I had to decide first which elements needed to make the transition, and then which ones could. Through a process of experiment and failure, I set about attempting to see how Scalar wanted to display and control these elements.

The 'home' tab was obvious: Scalar, too, has a button to allow the reader to return to start, so I moved on to the next problem. Initially, I had not considered including the 'videos' tab, which allows the reader to view all of the videos without regard to category or descriptors, in my translation. However, I eventually concluded that I wanted the user to be able to preview each video and see them in as flat an arrangement as possible. After some experimentation, I was able to reach a satisfactory translation by creating a page, typing out the titles of each video, and embedding links to the media pages therein. In the interests of visual fidelity, I set this to display in 'split emphasis', which provides the reader with the list of titles on one side, and the preview frames for the video on the other. Once I had gotten it working, I added this page to the main menu sidebar.

The next element, the browse categories in the left sidebar, was actually the first one I focused on when beginning the translation. I decided to make the descriptors, organized in my collection under the headings '# 'DDC' and 'Participant Last Name,' into tags: in Scalar, how this worked was by creating a page (DDC, for instance), designating it as a tag, and creating 'daughter tags' which were tagged by the appropriate top-level categories. These 'daughter tags' corresponded to the subcategories in the original collection: e.g., #sorrynotsorry in #, 300 in DDC, and A-F in Participant Last Name. It was challenging to do this with the "empty" DDC sub-categories, but I figured it out: I created each page as a tag (tagged itself by the DDC page), tagged videos that did not belong in them, and later deleted those tag relationships¹. This ensured that the pages were defined in Scalar as tags, but allowed them to have no further connections.

I chose this method of translation because I wanted to approximate the access (and the frustrations thereof) that the Open Video Digital Library Toolkit collection presented. By creating the three top-level tags, and setting the home page of my Scalar book to display a tag visualization (the Sustainable Searching index page connected to the three top-level tags), I felt that I had provided at least an analog to the kind of immediate, expandable access which the sidebar in the OVDLT had presented. It also invites the reader (I hope) to interact with the collection in a more literal sense, through clicking to expand the tag nodes and exploring from there; doing so would also reveal the dead ends- the empty tags- and possibly invite the reader to wonder why they had been included.

At the next level of access, it was important to me to recreate in some fashion the pre-made 'collections' which appeared in the original. There were no 'playlists' (collections generated by users) to take into account, so I did not have to worry about how to differentiate the two types of collection. The most obvious way of dealing with this, for me, was by implementing paths to stand in for those collections ("Clapping" and "Shelf 600", respectively) and setting the display so that the Main Menu sidebar showed the paths, just as the front page of the original collection had. The videos occur on the path in the same order that OVDLT had displayed them, but (acknowledging that the "on rails" feeling of the linear path gives a different experience from the page of videos that OVDLT displays) I chose the media visualization view, which displays the videos as nodes in a cloud without reference to their place on the path; once entered, the path order takes over, but I found this an interesting counterpoint to the fixity of the path structure.

While Scalar is a very different beast than the OVDLT, my primary goal throughout this translation was that the overall impression and impact be similar to that of *Sustainable Searching*. I knew that I would not be able to replicate the visual layout of the original, but I felt it was important to have similar access to materials, and have the semantic links between the videos left in place and as visible in Scalar as they had been in the OVDLT.

The subject of visibility brings me to my decisions about how to translate OVDLT tags. The tags, in my collection at least, were not immediately obvious nor searchable without first accessing a video. Once the video had been selected, the tag (as opposed to categories which begin with #, which I call hashtags) became visible, as did the details, summary, abstract, and other metadata associated with

¹ How many times can I use the word "tag" in a sentence?

the video. The key for me was that it became visible only after accessing a video, and only from there could the tag be selected to show others with that tag. That structural attribute is what influenced my decision to turn what had been tags in ODVLT into annotations in Scalar: they shared a similar organizing and elucidating function, but were at a similarly obscure level. Admittedly, one has to actually notice that a video is annotated and click to reveal that annotation in Scalar, but once the reader does so, he can also then select to see what (if any) videos share that annotation.

A note: I did not choose "comment" for the tag analog specifically because I wanted to retain the conscious authorial absence (what I termed *erasure* in my essay) which characterizes this collection, and putting the tags into the comments field gave them too much presence and personality. I did consider it, particularly as it would further destabilize the authority of the DDC by making the specific classification (646.7, eg) into a matter of personal choice by a user, but decided against it because I wanted to retain the same level of anonymity, the absence of an authoring agent, for all the elements.

Some decisions were simple: *Sustainable Searching*'s curator had not changed the names of the videos in the ODVLT collection, and so neither did I. The sentence summaries and abstracts, meanwhile, had been replaced by a human-generated transcription of the first fifteen seconds of the video: the transfer over to Scalar's description field largely involved mechanical effort, not mental. Others were harder to make; many of the metadata fields which the ODVLT supports, such as "responsible entities" and "rights information" did not map well in Scalar, and so I was left with making the decision to exclude them despite knowing that the original curator had put thought into that information. The "storyboard" feature which accompanies videos in the ODVLT looked interesting, but I found it both difficult and unrewarding to attempt to transport it into the new tool, particularly once I realized that I had never really noticed the feature until deciding to translate it.

There is one element which, although it was instrumental in my first impression of the collection, was not added until very nearly the end of the project. The background image for my translation is a still from *Toxic Waste From A to Z*; its violently contrasting purple, black, and green on the front page of the ODVLT page made a strong impression on me, jarring me not a little when I first opened the collection, and I wanted to retain the element of visual surprise and import it into the Scalar environment, which might otherwise be too soothing. A few poor attempts at scaling it finally resulted in a size I was happy with: I like that the current background isn't actually centered, and that the text is largely illegible, blurring out into a haze of jarring visual noise. It seems fitting, somehow, that the first thing I noticed was the last thing I added.

As I say, I cannot be sure that my attempt at preserving the meanings and implications of *Sustainable Searching* was successful, and I have now spent way too much time staring at my translation to be objective about it. There came a time, though, when I felt that I was done and the translation complete, regardless of its accuracy. Whatever flaws it had would have to either be removed or become features in the next step of the project, which I will now attempt to detail.

For the extension, I decided to stop referring to the ODVLT collection as my document of authority, instead limiting myself to my translation for things like how descriptions are formatted or in what kind of order videos should appear in a path. Just as when I began my translation, referring only to *Sustainable Searching* in preference to the ODVLT Sustainability collection, which I had consulted as part of my interpretive essay, so I once again focused on the closest source. That is not to say that I abandoned *Sustainable Searching*, only that I no longer wanted to reference it in its previous context; with the work of translating done, I took my translation for source material and built off of it, this time in a native language.

The result is *Searching Sustained*, a title I chose very specifically: I feel that it emphasizes the process of searching, and the potential time one could spend searching, unfolding, and discovering in this new form. While Scalar, as a book, seems to offer fewer re-combinations than the relational database, I found that the virtually unlimited number of connections which can be made between pages

provided an unexpected potential for depth and breadth. Frankly, the challenge for me was to limit these connections so that the book remained navigable: I tried several trial combinations that ended up deleted, because while they were fascinating and exploited Scalar's capabilities, they made the interface practically incomprehensible². It is possible that this would have foregrounded the residual more effectively than my current design: it is possible that I have still succeeded in creating something unusable.

In this book, I wanted to expand on the ideas that I had carried over with *Sustainable Searching*, but also to deal more with the recalcitrance of the objects in the collection, the way elements could be juxtaposed, and the paucity of fixed categories. What I mean by that is that I wanted to draw attention to not just the videos which crossed the lines of exclusivity (though I did a good bit of that), but the way that the structures I had imposed- tags, hashtags, paths, and annotations- were themselves objects in the collection more or less amenable to arrangement; I envisioned them in a kind of dialog, pushing against and commenting on each other as well as the media pages and the content of the videos, and I wanted to bring that to the front.

Of course, there were mechanical problems to solve: importing the new videos and getting them into the arrangement, deciding whether or not to keep the Who's Translating Whom? video as it had been entered (I did, as it happens), settling on a method for accomplishing my lofty yet poorly-defined goals. Incorporating the new videos might have been the easiest task I faced, despite being the one which I dreaded most. In contrast to almost the entire rest of the collection, where I took the previous curator's word for it as far as classification was concerned, these new videos I actually watched. Firstly, because my own standards required that I at least listen to the first fifteen seconds (and once invested, why not watch a little more?); and secondly, because there is a line between being playful with contrasting systems of organization and just throwing things in anywhere.

For the new videos, then, I watched them all the way through, taking notes as to which DDC annotation, and therefore tag and shelf, they seemed to belong (as well as close contenders and ironic alternatives so that I could "misfile" them in other shelves). Hashtags I added based on my personal reactions to the video, because that is what they are for: subjective response and critique. I did not elect to add either new hashtags or new annotations, preferring to work within the structural confines of the original collection (despite the curator's note in the design draft that he'd left the DDC call numbers as tags so that users could later manipulate them), and by pushing on it, see where and if it could be more elastic- if I could use the existing categories to my own ends without having to make new ones.

While completing the translation, having read the design brief, I had decided to build new paths in my extension, building on and exploring the curator's idea of "shelf browsing" for the DDC category. Taking the curator's idea and running with it, I reorganized the "Shelf 600" by annotations, so it more resembled a library shelf, and applied the same internal organization to the other "shelf" paths. I wanted in the DDC paths to create a kind of serendipity while simultaneously destabilizing the immutability or fixity of the collections/paths/ shelves. After having toyed with the idea of cross-annotating (or duple, triple etc annotating) individual videos, I turned to the idea of simply "leaving" them in the "wrong" shelf, in a section where it would have been plausible to find them had the curator indexed them otherwise.

In the interests of establishing and then subverting expectations, I chose to display both the DDC subject and how many videos were in each path by adding that information to the 'contents' section of the page. However, I only included the count of the videos which "belonged" there (according to their tagging and annotations); in some cases, it is immediately obvious (thanks to the visualization) that this official count is incorrect. In other cases, it may take the reader a little while longer to realize that the reported count and the actual count differ, which I hope will help draw attention to those videos which fit logically within the shelf, but which are technically misfiled. I feel I

² As one of my classmates discovered during the Who's Translating Whom? in-class exercise

should point out that I placed the misfiled videos not only on a shelf where they might just as well have gone, but in a section (if the reader cares to check the annotations) where they might have just as sensibly been indexed. This took a certain amount of reading through the DDC headings, and would probably go unnoticed by most users, but I found it very rewarding to do, which counts as a success by my standards.

The DDC tags and relationships are founded on a strong hierarchy and are amenable to the kind of organization (and disorganization) on which the paths in Scalar operate; a certain playfulness with their boundaries, while using the clear divisions between each group, allowed me to suggest at the residual and the instability inherent in the system. The hashtags, however, do not lend themselves to the kind of linear, subject-oriented collections which the DDC classes literally line up for; in the context of the Scalar book, the hashtags became a site of recalcitrance, plainly resistant to my attempts to create paths with them. This left me with something of a problem, as I did not want the DDC tags to enjoy easier access than the other categories.

After several failed attempts to transform the paths by including disparate objects (a video page, a tag page, a smaller path formed of related hashtags), I scrapped the idea of having each category operate on the same level (or, using the same elements) and adopted a different approach. One of the ways I addressed this resistance was by having each shelf terminate not by looping back to its start, or even going to the index page, but jumping to a hashtag page. I chose which hashtag should follow which path by determining which hashtag would most comment on the message of the previous videos; so Shelf 800, "literature", is followed by #realtalk, while "Clapping" is followed by #placebo techno-radicalism. Ending the shelves in this way, I hoped, would disrupt (or perhaps punctuate) the simulation of shelf browsing with alternative views of the videos, and ways to access them.

This choice had knock on effects for the rest of the book: after counting up the number of hashtags I had versus the paths I had already defined, it became obvious that I needed more paths than I had DDC call numbers, even including the "empty" shelves (which I assembled specifically to leave misfiled items in), but not much more. In fact, in order for the numbers to line up, I would need to create one (and only one) more non-DDC shelf.

Taking "Clapping," which reduced the TED talks to the noise of adulation, as my guide, I designed "Show Me" around the concept of more or less effective "how to" or demonstration videos. Most of these videos are instructive in some way, but some of them purport to be demonstrative as well: of those, many are merely more lectures, but a few demonstrate a process or impart some actionable information, and I wanted to pit the two instructive modes against each other. Just as "Clapping" moved the TED talks out of their context of "ideas worth sharing" into a more critical space, I wanted to highlight how well or poorly, or even in what manner, these videos show the viewer something.

The other way I chose to deal with the resistance to collection of the hashtags was by presenting the # page, in tag-visualization form, in the sidebar. This shortcuts the process of discovery by tag; I also put the subcategories of Participant Last Name in the main menu, also displaying in the tag visualization. I chose tags over media because I wanted to display the tag as the central organizing unit around which the videos were collected. I excluded the DDC tag page, however, preferring to bury it in favor of the shelf paths so as to highlight better how videos could have multiple designations even within the traditional, hierarchical classification system.

With those things done, I felt that I had finished with the conceptual work of the book: my hope was that, having built those basic structures and positioned them against one another, I had made something which at least allowed space for the reader to encounter and explore the notion of residuality. What was left to do was tweak the style and the overall visual impact of the book, hopefully in ways which supported my structural ambitions.

In class, I made the comparison between the Scalar project and a car or a motorcycle: I like to get all the parts moving before I start on the paint job. I should have been more precise. It is true that,

in most cases, what is most important to me in any creative project is that the thing does what I want it to do before I start polishing it. That is not to say that the polish (paint job, cowling, theme, background image) is not an important part of the overall project. In some cases, it is integral to the success of the project that it appear just right. If one is building a track bike, then the engine is the most vital element (followed by the brakes). If, however, one is building the Batmobile, then bodywork becomes critical.

Finishing this book, I spent serious mental energy deciding how it should appear, playing with page layouts and font options before making my final decisions. For the paths, I kept the media visualization; in the case of the All Videos page, I changed from the split view to a media visualization as well, which decreased loading time and visual "noise" (in the form of all those preview windows) while also decreasing visual "signal" (little green blobs are not terribly informative). I believe I have mentioned the decision to display the # and alphabetical categories in the tag visualization. I left the index page as I had inherited it from the translation: it was the main menu in the left sidebar which underwent the most transformation.

I played with the order of the main menu items before finally settling on All Videos, then #, then the alphabetical divisions in order, and then an arrangement of the DDC "shelves" which is flanked by the thematic collections ("Clapping" and "Show Me") and non-sequential. The non sequence is based on two axes: loosely on thematic association between classes (general knowledge, language, literature; science, social science, technology; philosophy, history, religion) and also on recorded number of constituent videos, with the categories containing the most toward the center (denser), and the ones with fewer toward either end. This vague resemblance to a bell curve pleased me at the time, and I think it still does, particularly since the reality of the curve (how many videos are actually in those paths) is different from the way it is presented. Bookending them with the thematic collections, one made by the original curator, one constructed by me, I felt could help remind the reader of the lack of inevitability in their arrangement and their contents.

I chose a theme, after cycling through all of them, on the basis of what made things "pop" the most. I was very concerned that the "other paths that intersect here" bar be obvious to readers, so that they might notice how the video they were looking at inhabited multiple spaces, and the high contrast of the Fathom theme brings that forward without me having to modify the HTML (I was prepared to do it if necessary, but the issue did not arise).

The background image for this book, again the last thing that went into it, is another screenshot from Toxic Waste From A to Z, a nod to both the translation and the OVDLT collection before it, but I used a different image this time. The eyewatering pink layers under the sidebar for a little extra depth when scrolling down the multiplicity of entry points, but that is not the only thing to recommend it. I liked that the "5" from the countdown looked rather like an "S," and I scaled the image so that most but not all of the image is visible. In what I feel is a fitting introduction to the book, what the reader sees tiling imperfectly behind the page space, offset and slightly incomplete, is either (both?) a never-ending countdown or "S ----- S" for *Searching Sustained*.