

Video Cassette Revolution

The VCR in Australia

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This thesis is entirely my own work, and I have not previously submitted it for assessment at a tertiary institution.

Signed, Michael Nugent: _____

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Abstract

This thesis is to serve as a history of the Video Cassette Recorder (VCR) in Australia. It has been done because while there are numerous histories relating to other aspects of Australian media, the history of the VCR itself remains little more than an aspect of narratives focused on other phenomena.

This was done through extensive examination of discursive sources, such as popular magazines, newspapers and trade journals. By reading these publications over the course of several years, I have been able to identify several trends unfolding over time, noting how popular conceptions of the technology have changed. By comparing these with work done on the history of home video in other countries, it allows for a greater understanding of what is unique to Australia's history with the VCR.

Perhaps the most significant finding is that the idea of what a VCR can offer is perpetually changing. What began as a simple means to record and playback programmes from television broadcasts quickly became a key part of commercial film distribution fundamentally altered the way in which people experience their television sets. As such, a struggle for position by producers, distributors and consumers erupted, as it irrevocably changed media in Australia.

Chapter 1: Introduction

My grandmother was an enthusiast of the video cassette recorder (VCR). Often, my visits to her house for the weekend would contain a period in which we sat and watched videos. She had all sorts of titles, from films such as *Stripes* (1981), *Naked Gun* (1988) and *Dark Crystal* (1982), to TV shows she and her friends had taped like *Star Trek* and *Murder She Wrote*. Many of our Saturdays were spent wondering why anyone lived in scenic but dangerous Cabot Cove, and why nobody ever suspected Jessica Fletcher of any of these murders. One day when talking about the VCR, she explained why she kept such an archive; when she was younger, there were only two channels, and one of them usually had sport on. But a “video machine” let you watch what you wanted, when you wanted, and with whom you wanted. The VCR made family film nights with her, her four children and their children possible, because all it took was for someone to go to the video store and request a copy of *Ghostbusters* (1984) or *Batman* (1989). Scary parts could be skipped, while funny parts could be repeated. The VCR was always there, always ready, and wouldn’t be preempted for a tennis match that went over time again.

The VCR was the biggest innovation in home entertainment since the introduction of the television itself, as it represented a significant shift in power between producer and consumer. Before the VCR, television presented the option of either watching the broadcast material or nothing at all. But through this new device, consumers were now able to expand what they could watch and how they could watch it. As a result, it reduced the distinction between the producers, distributors and consumers, as one individual could record a programme, make copies, and then the user could trade them amongst others.

The VCR was first commercially released into Australia in 1980. At this time, Australia's media landscape was relatively sparse. Across the country, there were five broadcast networks; ABC and SBS, which were both government owned, and Seven, Nine and Ten which were commercial enterprises. One's experiences with these five networks varied depending on your location within Australia. Someone living in Sydney or Melbourne would easily be able to receive all five networks with reasonable clarity. However, someone living outside of these urban or suburban spaces would not have the same experience. A person living in the regional centres of Australia would often only be able to receive three to four of those channels or their regional variants, thus creating an experiential divide within Australian television viewing. Watching these networks was the only way viewers could utilise their television, clearly defining a relationship between producer and consumer in the television dynamic wherein a television was only as useful as local broadcasters allowed it to be. What the VCR did was allow the user of the television to place material of their own choosing on the screen, breaking the monopoly possessed by the broadcasters of the time.

The body of this thesis is divided into two chapters. The first chapter will deal with the VCR in the public sphere, and how it affected the relationships between consumers, distributors and producers of entertainment media. This will include examinations of take-up rates in Australia, the rise of the video store, and its effects on entertainment in Australia. In addition to this, the chapter will also examine the rise of the illicit side of the video trade, focusing on the pirated tape trade.

The second chapter will focus exclusively on the domestic sphere, and how it was affected by the VCR's presence. Through its ability to play entertainment on demand, it changed family leisure time, as well as the role of the television in the house. The television went from a device of merely receiving and displaying broadcasts, then repurposed to show material from videocassettes, increasing the control the domestic user had over what could be on the television. This chapter will

cover what people recorded, rented and bought for their home VCRs, as well as their viewing habits and the way in which families engaged with their television.

Because the focus of this thesis is the history of the VCR in Australia, the literature selected needs to be relevant to media, Australian history, and the development of home video. Notably, while many texts address the history of media in Australia, few address the history of the VCR, instead making it a minor facet of another history, such as the television or wider Australian culture. As a result, this array of texts creates an historical context for examining and interpreting Australia's experience with the VCR that is not entirely cohesive. Perhaps the most important thing about this literature is that those articles which are about the VCR do not give the history of the device itself, but rather the social history of the use and meanings around the device. For example, the Betamax and VHS format war was not about which device had technical superiority, but rather which device was superior in the eyes of a consumer.

The background for this thesis is based around two key fields. The first of these is Australian media history, focused on television and home entertainment. The second is the emerging field of histories of technology. These fields combine around the history of the VCR itself, which serves as a technological artefact of a specific period in history. The history of media is a recently delineated field of academic inquiry, which combined previously existing fields of histories such as history of broadcasting, music or film with the understandings of media studies to create a wider and more comprehensive field.¹ Similarly, the field of technological history is a sub-discipline of cultural history, whereby the objects studied are not done so for their innate qualities or attributes, but rather the way in which they were conceived by those who used them as a means of better understanding the artefacts themselves.²

¹ John Nerone, "Approaches to Media History," in *A Companion to Media Studies*, ed. Angharad N. Valdivia (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006). pp. 47-51.

² Deborah G Douglas, "Foreword," in *The Social Construction of Technological Systems: New Directions in the Sociology and History of Technology*, ed. Wiebe E Bijker, Thomas P Hughes, and Trevor Pinch (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2012). p. viii.

This project is reliant on two key terms; cultural history, and television. Cultural history is a methodological sub-discipline of history. Focusing on an anthropological approach to studying the past, its key methodology is based on the utilisation of sources relating to how something, be it an event, object or idea has been perceived by certain historical actors and how these perceptions are expressed.³ As a result, it is an ideal way to examine the VCR phenomenon, by examining how it has been perceived and conceived by people in an attempt to reconstruct its historical meaning.

While it may not seem so, the word television is inherently contentious in itself, especially as it relates to the VCR. This word can be used two ways; the first of which defines television as something akin to a genre, referring to broadcast or subscription television, where the source is outside of the domestic space, meaning that to watch television is exclusively to watch a broadcast. The second is referred to in Noble's TV or Not TV, where the television is treated as an object for displaying media.⁴ This has the effect of widening the definition to include non-broadcast sources such as pre-recorded video tapes, so long as they are watched on a television. While overall not a major distinction, it can have far reaching consequences, in that while many draw this distinction, a few do not. This means that certain articles need to be examined more closely to determine the exact meanings of certain words used. In this thesis, I shall be using the first definition of television, wherein it is both a physical object, and the broadcasted material displayed on screen, as opposed to any content displayed on screen.

With regards to key approaches to the subject matter, this thesis will utilise the methodological approaches of Carroll Purcell and Elaine Lally. While these pieces are not especially relevant for their content, they are relevant for the way in which they apply their methodology to a comparable historical phenomenon, providing a useable theoretical framework for this thesis.

³ Anna Green and Kathleen Troup, *The Houses of History: A Critical Reader in Twentieth Century History and Theory* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1999). pp. 79-87.

⁴ Grant Noble, "The Social Significance of VCR Technology: TV or Not TV?," *The Information Society: An International Journal* 5, no. 3 (1988). pp. 136-140.

The first of these is Carroll Purcell's cultural history text *A History of Technology in America*.⁵ Purcell's argument is that all technological advancement is inherently socially conditioned, because all innovations must face the domestic consumer marketplace for their ultimate validation. While the rest of his text primarily concerns an outline of western European and then American social and technological interactions, it is his overarching argument which is the most useful. Elaine Lally's⁶ book *At Home with Computers* outlines the rise of the PC in the domestic sphere. Her argument is based on the idea of two opposing forces compelling domestic consumers to adopt new technologies, through the prism of the home PC. There is a positive, attractive force which compels people towards a device, usually through its offer of opportunities, be they educational, economic or social. Conversely, there is also a negative, repelling force which compels people toward a device through the threat of losing economic opportunities, or social standing. Although she is writing about the home PC as opposed to a dedicated media device, her approach to studying the adoption of new technology is useful. What these two approaches have in common is their idea that technology is in many ways a social construct. What made an object like the VCR useful was not its technological capability, but rather the fact that society found a purpose for it.

Throughout the existing literature on the history and role of the VCR, there are four key approaches. The first of these is a spatial approach, dealing with how various physical spaces were affected by the VCR's existence. This means the home (television areas especially) as well as commercial spaces, such as video stores, and the cinema. The second is that of economic history; primarily focusing on the fiscal drivers and effects of home entertainment. Historians Frederick Wasser and Joshua Greenberg focus on the United States of America, with limited engagements

⁵ Carroll Purcell, *The Machine in America: A Social History of Technology*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2007). p. 17

⁶ Elaine Lally, *At Home with Computers* (New York: Berg, 2002). pp. 25-27

outside of the USA.⁷ As the VCR is primarily a consumer product which can utilise other consumer products (prerecorded or blank tapes), this seems to most straightforward way to examine (but not necessarily interpret) its history. The third approach is social, as most of the texts which deal with the history of the VCR and television do so through the lens of the family and technology's place within it. This is a key approach to the VCR because of its ability to serve as a key part of social gatherings, which is reflected in a great many primary sources. The fourth is that of sociology; these are texts which deal with the VCR's place in their local culture. This is less common, and often are written by sociologists dealing with the VCR as a sociological phenomenon, wherein people are given more control over an almost universally used leisure device.

One of the most common themes in the existing literature is that the VCR afforded people greater control over the viewing material, and how this was addressed by various parties, often invoking spatial and sociological approaches to the subject matter. The idea of people being able to choose their content is addressed by many authors, in many contexts. This is not limited merely to the control of the content being presented on the screen, but also of the space and people around them. Many articles posit that the presence of the VCR and its enhancement of the television allowed people to do more with the viewing space, by turning it into a home cinema, or using it to simulate other environs such as live concerts and theatre.⁸

Furthermore, it is posited that the control it afforded affected family television viewing activities. Whereas it had previously consisted of the family choosing from the available broadcasts, the VCR family's choice now included the possibility of selecting specific videotapes to view together. What makes this approach compelling is that it ascribes more agency to the VCR than

⁷ Frederick Wasser, *Veni, Vidi, Video: The Hollywood Empire and the VCR* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2002).

Joshua M Greenberg, *From Betamax to Blockbuster: Video Stores and the Invention of Movies on Video*, Inside Technology (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2010).

⁸ Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 181-187.

Barbara Klinger, *Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies and the Home* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), p. 333.

many other sources who have looked at the VCR in a domestic space, and examines it from both a spatial and social perspective. In addition to this, others argues that use of the VCR presented a more “intense” use of the television, due to the greater effort required to screen the content in one’s home.⁹ While normal television broadcasts were often watched while doing other things such as domestic tasks, a program on the VCR would often command more attention. More specifically, many suggest that the VCR was quickly utilised as a device for babysitting and educating small children, whose attention could now be drawn as needed by pre-recorded children’s programming, effectively turning the television into an even greater labour saving device for parents.¹⁰ What these ideas show is that while the VCR was an addition to an existing entertainment device, its impact on users was wider than just the ability to choose more content.

The idea of control over space and within society also extends far beyond the space of the home. A common position within the literature is that the existence of the VCR in the home represented a fundamental shift in power relating between the consumer, distributors such as broadcasters, and producers of content.¹¹ Until the emergence of the VCR, the television was only able to be utilised through the content provided by local broadcasters, giving them a collective monopoly on use of a device. However, the choice afforded by the VCR meant that they faced competition in the form of video rental and retail, which gave content producers a new means of interacting with the consumer. What these texts show is that several authors acknowledge the potential power granted to people via the VCR, they all explore it from different angles, showing the wide array of effects. However, none of them overlap significantly in their coverage of material, showing that the wider idea of the VCR and its relationship with its users is one which has yet to be explored meaningfully.

⁹ Mark R. Levy, "VCR Use and the Concept of Audience Activity," *Communication Quarterly* 35, no. 3 (1987). p. 278. Dean M Krugman and Keith F Johnson, "Differences in the Consumption of Traditional Broadcast and VCR Movie Rentals," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 35, no. 2 (1991). pp. 216-220.

¹⁰ Kathy A. Krendl et al., "Preschoolers and VCRs in the Home: A Multiple Methods Approach," *ibid.* 37, no. 3 (2009). pp. 296-299.

¹¹ Noble, "The Social Significance of VCR Technology: TV or Not TV?." p. 137.

Homogeneity is a common thread throughout many authors' conceptions of the VCR, albeit in disparate places. The first engagement with homogeneity is the idea of the perceived homogeneity of existing broadcast media acting as a driving force for the adoption of the VCR. In effect, this makes the VCR serve as a device of entertainment liberation. This is present in Ogan's *Worldwide Cultural and Economic Impact of Video*.¹² In this text, Ogan looks across thirty industrialised nations, and concludes that a key driver of VCR adoption is that of media homogeneity, wherein the existing media available to the consumer had little variety. Through looking at their pre-existing media landscapes including availability of niche, foreign language and explicit content, she draws a conclusion that given equal economic factors, VCR adoption was inversely correlated with media diversity, meaning that more diverse media markets see slower rates of adoption than markets where there is little variety, such as Australia.

Similarly, the consumer drive to the VCR also helped to create and incentivise a diversified content. As more people adopted the technology, the demand for niche content intensified as small percentages of the audiences became greater in absolute numbers. This is addressed in Frederick Wasser's *Veni, Vidi, VCR*, which examines the emergence of cheap, straight to video releases as part of its overall argument.¹³ These are infamous films such as "chop socky" martial arts films from East Asia, as well as cheap "schlock horror" films, which gained such notoriety that they became cult genres in their own right. Designed for cheap budgets to be sold to video stores at cut rates, they proved a profitable enterprise made entirely possible through the VCR. In addition to this was pornography, the emergence of VCR technology made it possible for pornography to be tailor made for specific audiences, because the economics of video retail meant that individual titles did not need to have broad appeal.¹⁴ What both of these texts show is the way in which the VCR has been

¹² Christine Ogan, "The Worldwide Cultural and Economic Impact of Video," in *The VCR Age: Home Video and Mass Communication*, ed. Mark R Levy (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1989). p. 245.

¹³ Wasser, *Veni, Vidi, Video*. pp. 120-135.

¹⁴ Alan McKee, Katherine Albury, and Catharine Lumby, *The Porn Report* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2008). pp. 33-45.

examined as a tool of enablement for both producers and consumers. Producers were now better able to target specific niches of consumers for niche material, and consumers were more able than ever to be able to find material to suit more specific tastes. This diversified content is an idea continued by both Julia R Dobrow, who examines the role of the VCR in expatriate communities in her article *Away From the Mainstream? VCR Use and Ethnic Identity*.¹⁵ Dobrow uses the Russian and Indian communities in parts of the United States, she identifies the cultural niches of those neglected by mass market media, and how for them the VCR was an escape from media product which reflected dominant cultural values and concepts, and a means of reengaging with their native cultures.

The second engagement with homogeny is one of the video product itself. A key facet of Australia's television experience is that one's location dictated the content they were able to receive.¹⁶ A person living in regional Australia would not always receive the same broadcast content as their counterpart living in metropolitan Sydney, because the content would be controlled by different distributors catering to regional sensibilities. However, the presence of a video retailer backed by centralised national production and distribution changed that dynamic, because people now had access to the same content. While the amount of content varied, X was X regardless of one's geographical location. This is a significant article because its theoretical base of spatial materialism addresses a key aspect of society not present in other texts; Australia's urban rural divide. What these texts all show is how different historians have seen the VCR approach the idea of homogeneity within media choice, both as something being simultaneously escaped and embraced in differing ways, which shows the inherent complexity of the idea and how it interacts with its own sociocultural context.

¹⁵ Julia R Dobrow, "Away from the Mainstream? VCR Use and Ethnic Identity," in *The VCR Age: Home Video and Mass Communication*, ed. Mark R Levy (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1989).

¹⁶ James Hay, "Locating the Televisual," *Television & New Media* 2, no. 205 (2001). pp. 206-207.

Another idea which is highly prominent is that of the economic and spatial transformation with regards to entertainment. The first is that the VCR itself presented people with a new interaction between personal economics and entertainment, as people who wanted to watch films were now able to do so based on their own schedule as opposed to that of the suppliers, which necessitated a transformation of existing media spaces as either a means of growth or a means of avoiding obsolescence. Film historian Barbara Klinger examines this new dynamic from the point of view of the cinema industry.¹⁷ Before the advent of the VCR, the neighbourhood cinema was primarily based around showing people films that they could not see anywhere else, and the overall experience was secondary. However, once consumers gained the ability to be able to watch films of their own choosing at home, the cinema industry was forced to transform itself from one which sold a product (the viewership of the film) to one which sold the experience of filmgoing instead. As a result, the cinemas themselves became more appealing venues, with better quality picture and sound, as well as a more comfortable seating arrangement. This spatial and economic history of the cinema shows that the VCR had profound economic effects on areas where it had no physical presence,

Furthermore, Greenberg argues that the dedicated video rental store itself was also a key factor in adoption of the VCR, because of the way it created a dedicated space to purchase, rent, and discuss the technology with others. Because of its offer of social interaction with (theoretically) knowledgeable video store clerks, video stores soon became a place for people and previously unseen materials to find one another. What these texts show is that the VCR's effect on commercial spaces is explored by various authors, but a common issue they both have is that like many texts, they are focused primarily on American suburbia and its specific economic and spatial dynamics. What makes them important to an investigation of the Australian history of the VCR is that they provide a research framework as well as a point of comparison for Australia's own context.

¹⁷ Klinger, *Beyond the Multiplex*. pp. 134-136.

Another commonly explored aspect of the economic history of the VCR is that of the heavy investment required by producers, distributors and consumers to partake in the usage of the new technology. The investment required by the distributors is covered by Greenberg, who outlined the approximate costs in both money and time required by those who sought to invest in video rental and sales outlets.¹⁸ In addition to the normal retail expenditures such as store space, and cash management, in order to remain competitive a video retailer needed to have several video players, as well as an advanced inventory management system, all of which proved a significant financial barrier to entry. This investment is further covered by Wasser and McKee, who focus more on the effort expended by content producers and distributors. Wasser posits that while there was an initial skepticism towards the medium of home video by major content producers like Disney, its popularity soon made it a pillar of film distribution which affected the way in which film production was financed and handled.

Similarly, McKee examines the phenomena through the lens of video pornography. He similarly posits that through the expansion of pornography into home video, producers and distributors were able to create and distribute content in a manner previously unthinkable. At the time, the only way to view pornographic films was through adult theatres, or through subscription television. But through the newfound ability for people to rent and buy pornographic tapes which could be enjoyed in the privacy of one's home, the market for pornography grew because people no longer needed to visit a viewing space. The investment by domestic consumers is an issue touched upon by many authors, most notably Greenberg and Arrow, who both discuss the VCR in its economic context.¹⁹ In the early nineteen-eighties, there was an economic downturn throughout much of the western world. However, it was also at this time that the domestic VCR came into the consumer market. As the device was nearly \$1000 depending on one's location, with prerecorded

¹⁸ Greenberg, *From Betamax to Blockbuster*. pp. 6-9.

¹⁹ Michelle Arrow, *Friday on Our Minds: Popular Culture in Australia since 1945* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2009). pp. 180-183.

tapes initially costing up to \$150, the VCR represented a significant investment in one's personal entertainment, until these prices began to drop significantly by 1986, costing as little as \$300.²⁰ These texts are all useful because they provide insights into the inherent difficulties of the early video era, with relevant economic data. One thing these texts overlook is the rental of the VCRs themselves. While Greenberg mentions the notion of short term VCR rental, the idea of long term rental is never addressed as a part of the discourse around domestic investment in the VCR. However, primary sources show that long term video recorder rental was available as early as 1983, which would place it within economic reach of more consumers than having to purchase a VCR outright.

Out of all of the texts which focus on the VCR, the key gap which they all share is that they are all focused on the United States or United Kingdom, with little attention given to the rest of the world. Furthermore, the majority of pieces do not examine the VCR in a wider context, but look at it relative to another phenomena, such as family dynamics or its place in ethnic enclaves. Conversely, Australian media histories largely do not address the VCR as an independent entity, but rather use it as a prop in other narratives, such as television and cinema.

In addition to this, there is also a key gap as it applies to the users of the VCR and their enhanced control over their leisure time. While many have addressed to varying degrees the economic power gained by consumers, this is the only area subject to such analysis. What remains largely unexplored is the power relationship between the producer and the consumer, which is a key part of the VCR's narrative.

Another key gap is in the methodologies employed by the researchers. Many of these texts rely on statistical and economic analyses, interviews and anecdotes. What they all lack (or barely use) are discursive primary sources such as contemporary newspaper or magazine articles, which are ideal for identifying and thus understanding how people conceived of an object, imprinting their

²⁰ Lea Wright, "Australians Tuned in to Video Cassettes," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 June 1989. p. 36

own ideas onto it. These sources are some of the most useful for assembling a history of the VCR, because of the wide array of opinions and ideas that they can offer owing to their differing publishers and purposes.

This gap is relevant because Australia has a unique place in the world's media landscape, and is not easily comparable to other nations due to its own population specifics, the diversity (or lack thereof) within a private and public broadcast television market, as well as geographical considerations. While other nations often had several broadcast channels, Australia had five, which were not uniformly available to all Australians, especially in isolated rural areas. The VCR itself represented a significant change in the way people could experience their televisions, and now that the time of the VCR has "passed" one can now examine the phenomenon as a whole from its inception to terminus. An increased understanding of this phenomena would increase the knowledge of how producers, distributors and consumers reacted to what was a massive shift in power between the producer/distributor/consumer through consumer's new ability to easily choose content, effectively controlling the means of entertainment consumption within the home, an angle which is not often explored except glancingly by some authors.

This thesis' place in literature will be in Australian media history, in the niche of home media. Through an attempt to create a narrative of a the VCR, it will pave the way for histories of other home media devices, which will chart their own specific causes and effects. Its theoretical efforts will be seeking to examine the balance of power between consumer, distributor and producer, how the VCR affected this dynamic, and thus will create a framework for future economic histories of media where the end user has significant agency, which is a largely unexplored field despite its commercial and societal significance.

My approach is ideal for this project because it is a cultural history, and the sources chosen for this are all discursive sources, in order to be able to reconstruct a sociocultural meaning of the VCR in an Australian cultural context. This means that instead of a simplistic timeline of

technological facts, I can instead reconstruct the social and cultural meaning of the device, which will lead to a greater understanding of this part of Australia's media history.

A key limitation of my research methodology is that it is not possible to see every pertinent piece of discursive primary evidence, because of the sheer amount of "raw material" available. However, this can be negated by trying to pick sources that are as representative of the diverse landscape as possible. This means picking sources that reflect diverse groups of people and their opinions, such as light entertainment magazines, newspapers of authority, and trade publications pertinent to the VCR and Australian media. Through this diversity of opinion and fact, this thesis can have as wide a base of discourse as is practical. However, these publications can have publication frequencies ranging from daily to monthly, which means that the amount that can be thoroughly examined is limited. As a result, I have two key methods for investigation of these materials. The first applied to weekly and monthly periodicals, which is one of reading approximately one quarter of total published material. For a weekly publication, this means the first issue of the month, and for a monthly publication this is the first issue of the quarter. This means that enough information is examined in order to identify and understand trends and patterns over time. The second method, used for daily publications such as newspapers, is utilisation of the National Library of Australia's Trove database. Holding newspapers in Australia dating back to the 1800s, Trove uses optical character recognition to make computerised searching of newspapers a practical reality. In order to investigate this better, I shall be using a series of search terms to retrieve relevant article. Whilst reading these articles, I shall be attempting to read against them, looking not only at the information presented, but also the contextual evidence that can help identify any other relevant facts.

My primary sources are divided into three categories. The first category is that of light entertainment magazines, such as *TV Week*, or the *Australian Women's Weekly*. These publications

are important because of the way in which they are designed to capture (and capitalise on) the cultural zeitgeist, thus serving as key artefacts in themselves of how people thought and conceived of key ideas. A key example of this is when in 1984, the magazine TV Week, primarily aimed at television viewers aged 18-49 began a regular column called *Video Vibes*, aimed at alerting the public to mainstream new and classic titles being released onto home video markets, as well as new or otherwise interesting developments in the field. Occurring alongside an ever increasing amount of advertisements for video players and video cassettes, it shows an increasing relevance of the new technology to the end level domestic consumer.

A limitation of this source is that while it does address the rise of home video, its status as light entertainment as opposed to an actual news limits the scope of the issues it can cover. An example of this is the ongoing debate regarding the “video nasty” phenomenon. Other publications of the same period, such as newspapers and trade journals address the debate, while magazines such as TV Week pay no attention to it.

This array of primary sources also includes major daily newspapers produced in Canberra, Sydney and Melbourne. These sources have been selected because each will convey a different mindset depending on their area of origin and presumed consumption. A key difference between a newspaper and a magazine like those cited above is that they are designed for different purposes; a magazine is meant to entertain, while a newspaper is meant to inform, and can thus yield more directly useful information in its news articles. A key example of this is the article *Video Market Booming* from 1982, wherein the rate of consumer adoption of the VCR was reported, along with statistics about its falling price and rising government taxes relating to the device and videocassettes.²¹ In addition to this, the letters and opinions columns are also useful for charting the opinions of the publishers and readers, and can be used to further understand how people were

²¹ Anonymous, "Video Market Booming," *The Canberra Times*, 20 May 1982. p. 25.

communicating about the VCR. This is evident through the ongoing debate regarding explicit films, especially those dubbed “video nasties,” which were films deemed so offensive because of their graphic content, that they were banned by the government. The key limitation of these sources is that while they are often quite comprehensive, they are geographically limited in their nature; a newspaper published in Sydney will reflect Sydney based concerns and ideas. To address this limitation, this thesis will use sources from a wide array of geographical locations in order to create a sampling more representative of Australian society. This will consist of *The Canberra Times*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, and Brisbane’s *Courier Mail*, and Melbourne’s *Herald Sun*. Providing discourse from three of Australia’s most populous cities as well as the rurally located national capital, this will ensure that an array of sources will be made available for use by this thesis.

My last type of primary source is that of the trade publication. Functioning like a newspaper for the relevant sector of the economy, I shall be using the publications from the field of video rental, as well as cinema in order to better understand how the video industry perceived the VCR and their own industry through its inherently different lens to the average consumer. Much of the news they present is statistical and unavailable to the general consumer, such as the monthly charts of best renting and best selling videos, as well as cost/benefit analyses of various video technology trappings. In addition to this is the editorial and letters content, wherein those working in the field as well as the publication voice their opinions. A key example of this is the ongoing controversy regarding the controls of content deemed inappropriate or harmful for children. In March, 1995, the front page was an article mentioning that the Sydney *Sun-Herald* had recently run a news article stating that children had been renting “video nasties” without being stopped by video store staff.²² The primary concern of the article however is not that the children are seeing potentially inappropriate material, but rather that being seen to be negligent in this matter would see the

²² "Kids Rent Video Nasties," *Video Trader*, 13/3/1995 1993. p. 1.

individual stores fined, and the industry made an easy target for unfavourable political attention during an election season.

The primary limitation on of this source is that the dialogue contained within it is inherently limited to the perspectives of the video store owners. Their varied gripes against both producers, customers, distributors and other store owners provide useful insight, but at the same time there is no representation given to the other side of these issues. In order to deal with this limitation, it will be important to read through these discussions more carefully in an attempt to find such things as inconsistencies, or other logically fallacious arguments.

A key facet of all of these sources is that they are all in part utilised because of their letters page, which can be problematic in terms of authenticity. This is an issue explored by Megan Le Masurier, who in an examination of the letters page of *Cleo* explored the reliability of letters pages as sources.²³ She posits that letters pages are useful because of the implied trusting relationship between the reader and the publication, as the writers and editors of magazines will often share the sympathies of their readers, leading to a participatory and almost symbiotic relationship. However, she argues that in certain publications, especially magazines, letters can be edited or outright fabricated to reflect the prevailing view of the publication itself. Therefore in my own research I shall be attempting to read against the letters pages in order to determine if there are any key preconceptions affecting the source and its reliability.

In addition to these primary sources, this thesis will also use a limited number of secondary sources in order to create an historical context for this previously unexplored area. These works include those of international media histories, as well as histories of Australian media and society. Through utilisation of these it will be possible to keep the focus of research on topic.

²³ Megan Le Masurier, "Desiring the (Popular Feminist) Reader: Letters to *Cleo* During the Second Wave," *Media International Australia* 131 (2009). pp. 109-110.

The primary focus for this thesis is the examination of discursive primary sources, to better understand how people conceived of the VCR in Australia. As a piece of cultural history, this is the ideal method, because in order to do a history of a piece of technology, it is important to deal not only with its attributes, but also how people conceived of it within wider society. This leads to a greater understanding of what an object meant as to merely what it was. The sources for this; a combination of local and national magazines, newspapers and trade journals, many of which have been digitised and thus are easier to search for the relevant material will make it possible to reconstruct a meaning of the past and be able to relate a thorough narrative of the VCR's history in Australia.

Chapter 2: The VCR in the Public Sphere

In the public sphere, the VCR represented a significant redefinition of the relationship between producer and consumer, through its enabling of consumers to have a far more specific control of the media they consumed on their home television. This was accomplished through multiple means. The first of these was the ability to record and replay programs at home, giving the consumer a means to enjoy television shows whose broadcast time was inconvenient for them. The second of these was that of the prerecorded tape, wherein one could rent or buy a cassette which had content such as films and TV shows prerecorded onto them. This represented the most important part of the VCR's effects on the relationship between producer and consumer because it allowed for the production of commercially viable niche material. In tandem, these two functions meant that the ascendancy of the VCR impacted on all facets of visual entertainment available to Australians.

The first way the VCR affected the balance between producer and consumer was through its ability to assert a limited control of the content being broadcast into the home. Before the VCR, televisions had a limited usage, wherein one either watched the broadcast channels, or declined to watch at all. As the VCR was first released into Australia in 1980, early players were sold purely on their ability to record and playback footage from television broadcasts, which Sony's CEO referred to as "time shifting" television.²⁴ This newfound control proved popular, as rates of video ownership increased drastically in this timeframe. With a recommended retail price of over \$1,200 in 1981, their initial prices proved prohibitive. The VCR was initially an item to be rented by most

²⁴ Anonymous, "Toshiba's New Betamax," *TV Week*, 03 May 1982. p. 24.

consumers, and owned outright by a few dedicated videophiles.²⁵ By 1982, they could be rented from less than \$7 a week for a minimum of six months, and were advertised based on their ease of use, ability to be upgraded and ongoing free servicing. Customers' ability to rent as opposed to buy made the technology more accessible, and more practical in the economic downturn of the early 1980s. In 1984, when Australia's video stores were in their infancy, approximately 25% of households possessed a VCR. By 1985, Australia had the highest per capita rate of VCR ownership in the world, as 40% of Australian households possessed one, the price had dropped by half, and more material was available for viewing, making them more economical and effective.²⁶ By 1987, this increased to over 50% of Australian households.²⁷ At this time, it was more important for people to get the most usage from their entertainment dollar, and the VCR provided that, as its cost was based on the unit itself, as opposed to the number of users. Weekly rental of a VCR plus a new release film would be less than \$15, which was half the cost of taking a family of four to the cinema. This represented a more economically effective way for Australians to engage with media, allowing them a level of choice greater than either the broadcast television or the cinema, for an affordable price. This initial control is important, because it starts the precedent of ever increasing VCR functionality, and as such it granted the consumer more options as to how to utilise the television.

A key driver in VCR adoption was that of existing broadcast content. While the ability to play back tapes was important, the ability to record programs and then watch them at a time of one's choosing was a major change in how Australians could experience television and its programmes. Because of the economic realities of commercial television, television programmes without mass-market appeal would often be relegated to late-night time slots where a smaller but dedicated

²⁵ "Video Market Booming," p. 25.

²⁶ Rama Gaind, "Australia Has Most Users," *ibid.*, 12 September 1985. p. 11.

²⁷ Australian Film Commission, *Australia's Audiovisual Markets: Key Statistics on Australia's Cinema, Video, Television and Interactive Media Markets* (Sydney: Australian Film Commission, 2004). p. 37.

audience would stay up to watch. As a result those who were interested in these films but were unable to stay up to watch them were now suddenly able to watch their favourite films at times of their own choosing. In a 1983 column, *Canberra Times* columnist Ian Warden exclaimed his triumph of finally being able to watch *Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1939), a film which was normally screened late at night, to the end because he was able to set the timer to record the film, and watch it the next day.²⁸ However not everybody was excited at this possibility. Commercial television networks feared that people's ability to fast forward or "zap" the through the commercials meant that people would affect their revenue. Because commercial broadcast television is funded through the sale of advertising time, any ability on a part of the viewer to avoid the income generating advertisements equated to a potential loss of revenue. While this was a concern, a study done in 1988 by Klopfenstein *et al* showed that most viewers of time-shifted material in the US and UK did not normally skip over the advertisements.²⁹ Similarly in Australia, a study by McNair Anderson showed that most did not skip over the advertisements when watching television.³⁰

Furthermore, the ability to record one show while watching another affected the ability of broadcast programmers to effectively program against one another. This initial engagement with the VCR reflected one key idea; that viewers wanted more than just what they saw on accessible broadcast television. They wanted the programs which were on early, late and when they were out of the house socialising. This was reflective of trends worldwide, where countries which had more television diversity tended to adopt the VCR technology at a lower rate. By 1989, Australia had a VCR ownership rate in excess of countries such as the US, UK, and Japan, and twice the world average. The US, UK, and Japan all had subscription television, and easy access to cinemas playing wide ranges of films.³¹ This is in contrast to Australia, whose people enjoyed far less access to

²⁸ Ian Warden, "Is This the Answer to Viewing the End of the Hunchback?," *The Canberra Times*, 28 January 1983. p. 9

²⁹ Bruce A. Klopfenstein, Sara C Spears, and Douglas A. Ferguson, "VCR Attitudes and Behaviours by Length of Ownership," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 35, no. 4 (1991). pp. 530-531.

³⁰ Anonymous, "Recorders Not Threat to TV," *The Canberra Times*, 16 April 1984. p. 3.

³¹ Robin Oliver, "The Video Whirs into Oz Life," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 August 1989. p. 3.

media on these terms, owing to Australia's relatively sparse population, which made investment in such structures impractical in all but the densest population centres. This is one of the key things that drove Australians to VCR adoption; the lack of easy alternatives to broadcast television, which would come in the form of the prerecorded cassette.

The prerecorded videotape took the home VCR to a far greater presence in the public consciousness, and is the most important part of the changes the VCR brought to home entertainment. Consisting of a cassette sold to a consumer with a title prerecorded onto it by the distributor, the sale of films and television programs on tape to consumers made it possible for consumers to have access to an unprecedented amount of legally available content on demand, and for producers to be able to sell straight to them. With only blank cassettes, the VCR allowed one to record and enjoy only existing broadcast material, with the technically proficient able to create and distribute bootlegged material. Bootlegged material at this point consisted of material taped from pay per view recordings in places such as hotels, or publicly screened filmed material.³² With an inherently portable VCR, one could plug it into the existing system with minimal effort and then create one's own copy for distribution. This represented a threat from the VCR to the distributors of commercially filmed material, through potential lost revenue due because they had no control of the material. Despite being criminalised with heavy fines, the sale and rental of pirated videocassettes became a lucrative enterprise which became hard to eradicate because its relative ease compared to its potential profits.³³ This led to the first legitimate releases of prerecorded films onto home video, which was initially a measure to thwart the growing field of "video piracy."³⁴

A 1980 article in TV Week heralded the coming of "Blockbuster Movie Tapes," which would include several major releases, without any of the problems inherent to televised versions of these

³² Greenberg, *From Betamax to Blockbuster*. pp. 17-19.

³³ Matt Condon, "Pulling the Plug on 'Video Pirates'," *The Sun Herald*, 17 June 1989. p. 6.

³⁴ Michael Z. Newman, *Video Revolutions: On the History of a Medium* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2014). pp. 45-46.

films, such as reception interference, edited adult content, and commercial interruptions.³⁵ The first home videos were rented as a part of businesses dedicated to other, usually related things, such as newsagents, service stations and convenience stores.³⁶ As demand grew for more pre-recorded tapes of popular films for public consumption, ownership of these films was evidently not always practical. In 1982, a newly released film, be it a recent film like *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark* or a classic like *Gone with The Wind* could cost upwards of \$60 retail.³⁷ However, a rental could be as low as \$5 a night for the consumer, which was an important factor at the time as Australia was experiencing an economic downturn.³⁸ As a 1982 TV Week article explained, in order for a domestic consumer to justify owning a prerecorded tape, one would need to watch it at least twelve times to justify the expense of buying as opposed to renting.³⁹ As a result of this cost disparity, there was a growing interest in renting videocassettes as opposed to buying them. Appliance companies like Rentlo offered a free membership in their video rental service for those who leased one of their VCRs. The videos advertised often consisted of a mix between classic films, and new releases, designed to appeal to audience interested in either nostalgia or newer films. However, videotapes were also rented by pharmacies and corner shops, both of whom saw potential ways to claim a share of his emerging market, while using the new product as a draw for their existing businesses. These stores were able to function with a small number of films at their convenient locations, yet demand continued to increase. This growth led to the rise of the dedicated video store.

Having libraries comprising of hundreds or even thousands of individual titles, video stores formed a basis for an expanded consumer choice comparable only to the public library or the record

³⁵ Anonymous, "Blockbuster Movie Tapes on the Way," *TV Week*, 02 February 1980. p. 36.

³⁶ Rama Gaind, "Millions Captivated by Home Videos," *The Canberra Times*, 4 December 1983. p. 5.

³⁷ Allan Webster, "Videos - Everything You Need to Know and a Little Bit More, Part 2," *TV Week*, 5 June 1982. p. 76.

³⁸ Ibid. p. 76.

³⁹ Ibid. p. 76

shop. However, there was another motive for the creation of dedicated stores; the potential for nearly unlimited screening of a film which was purchased for a one-off price represented a threat to the existing film distribution model, based on licensing the material to cinemas or television networks for periodic fees. In response, Australian film distribution company Palace sought to establish its own chain of video outlets, where they could retail and rent their own material to the viewing public.⁴⁰ Amidst this rise, there also came a number of small chains, and independent stores founded by those who saw the potential in the medium. Palace's video outlets soon closed their doors as they focused instead on supplying those new stores. As Australia's video market took shape, it became focused on convenience and range, making sure that the store was easily accessible and stocked a range of titles to appease any potential customer. The video store in effect became the legitimate point of access for people to engage with non-televised content, in an economical way, enabling their entertainment choices through their access to the video store.

Video stores also had an effect on film distribution. As their popularity and rate of use increased, video rental became a major factor in film distribution strategies, representing a new form of revenue. By 1986, the worldwide income from home video releases were equal to and exceeded the income from cinematic releases.⁴¹ As a result, the time between a cinematic release and a home video release decreased so that a home video release might capitalise on the recent cinematic run of a film, and advertisements began appearing on the tapes themselves.⁴² One of the most infamous of these was a Pepsi ad placed at the start of the United States' home video release of *Top Gun* in addition to the usual previews. The ad proved unpopular, and as such saw significant negative response from both video store owners and their customers, some stores threatening to only stock Pepsi's competitors if this trend continued, and consumers complaining that one of the

⁴⁰ Anonymous, "Palace Opens Its Doors," *ibid.*, 03 March 1984. p. 41.

⁴¹ Wasser, *Veni, Vidi, Video*. p. 131.

⁴² Anonymous, "Boom Calls for Early Taping of Movie Hits," *The Canberra Times*, 25 March 1983. p. 10.

VCR's main draws was the lack of commercials of that nature.⁴³ While import laws proved prohibitive, meaning the commercial would not be screened on Australia's *Top Gun* release, the Australian releases of *The Princess Bride* (1987) carried commercials for confectionery, and the release of *Platoon* (1986) carried a commercial for the Jeep.⁴⁴ This is indicative of how consumers conceived of the VCR and its place in entertainment. As commercials were perceived as being something belonging to television, their unexpected presence and the backlash to that presence showed that while people did not necessarily have an opposition to commercials themselves, as omnipresent trailers saw little feedback, unrelated advertisements broke up the pseudo-cinematic atmosphere a rented cassette could provide for its audience.

The video store itself was a dedicated space for selling not just the filmic product, but also the experience of film. Usually arranged by genre, with a prominent spot for the films newly released onto video from their cinematic run, the prime driver for the layout of the video store was the idea that a customer could easily find what they wanted, but also be exposed to other titles which could spark their interest and a possible rental. In a manner similar to bookstores, libraries and record shops, popular titles were placed on the shelves with just their spines exposed, showing only their title, while titles that the store wanted to promote were placed with their front facing out, with the hope that the cover art would entice the passing consumer into renting the film. But in addition to the product also came the experience of renting. A common practice for video stores was not just to rent the titles, but to also sell the confectionery and snacks which typically accompanied films screened in cinemas, such as the iconic movie staple popcorn, some video stores going so far as to generate the smell of popcorn in their stores.⁴⁵ In effect they were not just set up to rent tapes, but to rent the idea of a cinematic experience in the domestic space.

⁴³ Greenberg, *From Betamax to Blockbuster*. pp. 144-145.

⁴⁴ Anonymous, "Advertising on Video: Will It Survive the Viewer's Zap?," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 02 March 1989. p. 8.

⁴⁵ Greenberg, *From Betamax to Blockbuster*. pp. 78-80.

However, the most important part of the video store was not the retail activity, but rather its ability to expose people to previously unseen material. In his memoir *A Nest of Occasionals*, Comedian Tony Martin recollects the story of early video stores in the city of Brisbane, and how people first took to them. Already a cineaste, Martin became more acquainted with films he knew, and also was able to widen his existing knowledge base of films. Working in an advertising firm, his coworkers gained access to the company's VCR in the break room, and therefore were introduced to the medium by being able to gather around and watch favourite scenes from comedies over and over during down time, to both enjoy the content and be able to see how specific effects shots were accomplished. As he concludes, those coworkers all soon bought VCRs of their own, and it looked as though "the video store was turning everyone into cineastes."⁴⁶

As the retail spaces dedicated to the new technology emerged, an irreconcilable divide was evident within the growing world of home video; the Betamax and Video Home System (VHS) formats were completely incompatible with one another. A Betamax VCR could not in any way interact with a VHS tape, and vice-versa, and the cost involved with buying another player was impractical for the general consumer. As a result, in order to reach the entire home video market a distributor was forced to create tapes in two formats, affecting their economies of scale. As a result of this, major video manufacturers began to create VHS only titles, discontinuing support for the Betamax format.

In looking at the VCR/Betamax format wars, it is important to understand that it was not merely two differing means of viewing the same product that were at stake, but different conceptions of the same technology. Marketing of the Betamax player was based on the quality of its technical components; multiple speeds of playback ranging from frame-by-frame to eight times normal, automatic rewind, the ability to watch one show while another was recording, clearer image

⁴⁶ Tony Martin, *A Nest of Occasionals* (Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 2009). p. 163

quality, and the now immortalised VCR digital clock.⁴⁷ This made it a highly valuable item for people interested in the technology as opposed to the product it screened. However, the VHS player was marketed on one key factor; the length of the cassette tapes and what could be done with them.⁴⁸ While a standard Betamax cassette was approximately one hour in length, a VHS tape could easily approach three hours, which was also the key contention in newspaper columns which dealt with the issue.⁴⁹ This meant that it was far more suited to the growing market of pre-recorded videocassettes with feature films. This made the VHS player a convenient tool for socialising at home, as it was more apt for the emerging idea of home theatre, and increased the importance of the VCR in entertainment, which saw cinema's place in the entertainment landscape threatened as it lost the exclusive ability to screen films uninterrupted. In 1988, Sony began production of VHS tapes and players, symbolically ending the format wars by paying royalties to manufacture their competitor's commercially superior product.⁵⁰ This reflected the growing reality in both Australia and the wider world; people wanted VHS. By 1989, 60 percent of Australian households had at least one VCR in the household, one of the highest rates of rates of uptake in the world.⁵¹

While the VCR affected many facets of the entertainment economy, perhaps none was as affected as that of pornography; as the consumers gained the ability to easily view material in the privacy of the home. Up to this point, pornography in the home environment was most commonly in the form of magazines. In order for one to view a pornographic *film*, one would be required either attend a public screening of the material, or make private use of a complex reel-to-reel projector. As a result, the VCR and home video rental created an ideal market space for pornography by combining its ease of use with the privacy of its environment. One of the most noticeable effects of

⁴⁷ Anonymous, "Advertisement: Toshiba's New Betamax." p. 24.

⁴⁸ "If You Bought VHS, You Made the Right Choice," *TV Week*, 12 December 1987. p. 35.

⁴⁹ Richard Scherer, "Magnetic Video Available on Consumer Market," *The Canberra Times*, 20 September 1981. p. 13

⁵⁰ David Frith, "Sony Bows to Beta," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 January 1988. p. 4

⁵¹ Commission, *Australia's Audiovisual Markets: Key Statistics on Australia's Cinema, Video, Television and Interactive Media Markets*. p. 57.

video pornography was that of the proliferation of cheaply made niche titles. Because previous filmed pornography was required to maximise the number of viewers per screening for its distributors, its producers had to account for mass market sensibilities.⁵² However, since the viewing space for pornography changed from a commercial space to a domestic one, the economic focus was now on the number of units consumed as opposed to the more complex economics of screening material. Therefore, producers could focus on market segments which had been the domain of printed pornography, such as niche customers which would be unserved by mainstream titles. It was this ability to cater to newly viable niche markets that saw the pornography industry grow rapidly to exploit the new customer base.⁵³

Straight to video (non-pornographic) titles tended to fall into three categories; media which commemorated important events, instructional videos, and cheaply made films designed for the rental market. Commemorative tapes emerged early in the nineteen eighties, usually purchasable through mail order. The most common things commemorated were sporting events, such as championship games, or other notable matches. However, the most prominent commemoration was the 1984 release of the 1981 wedding of Britain's Prince Charles to Diana Spencer. Both popular fodder for tabloid and gossip media, their wedding was a massive event for home video upon its release.⁵⁴ In addition to commemoration tapes was that of the instructional video, from videos instructing people in sports such as fly fishing and Jane Fonda's workout tape, or instructing people as to how they could conduct home repairs. It should be noted that these were not entirely limited to the commercial market. Australian government organisations such as the

⁵² McKee, Albury, and Lumby, *The Porn Report*. p. 58.

⁵³ Ibid. p. 59.

⁵⁴ Anonymous, "Royal Video in Demand," *The Canberra Times*, 07 September 1984. p. 5.

Commonwealth Employment Service, and the school of the air in rural Queensland began using pre-recorded tapes as educational tools.⁵⁵

Another and far more popular type of straight to video title was that of the straight to video feature film. Usually cheaply made, and targeted at a niche genre audience such as “chop socky” or “schlock horror” films, they would be marketed directly to their most likely consumers with no wider attention sought or needed. These films, with titles such as *Revenge of the Ninja* (1983)⁵⁶ and *Redneck Zombies* (1986)⁵⁷ were predominantly kept within the confines of the video store, as they often had so little rewatchability as to be unviable on the retail market. It was this principle that made them popular with video stores, as each tape had such a low unit cost that a store could recoup the costs of a purchase with fewer rentals than a more expensive mainstream title.⁵⁸ Furthermore, they proved a more economically safe means for a store to widen its range of stock. Another of the key categories of straight to video content was that of the “special edition,” a recut version of an existing film. Due to the fact that between a studio production and the consumer, a film must pass through several agencies, multiple people have a chance to cut the film down as they see fit, be it to reduce running time, raise commercial viability, or meet classification requirements. The new medium of home video and its ability to engage with niches meant that it was an ideal platform for the release of such material. Economically, special editions allowed film producers to effectively sell the same film twice, by re-editing it to add content which was cut from the initial cinema and home video release. Early version of these were science fiction such as contemporary films *Aliens* and *The Abyss*, as well as classic materials such as *Star Trek* and *American Graffiti*. While the motive for this was inherently commercial, it represented a way for

⁵⁵ "Outback Video," *The Canberra Times*, 6 May 1982. p. 8.

Reg Leighton and Dana Leighton, "School Libraries: A Changing Trend," *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 6 February 1980. pp. 125-126.

⁵⁶ Sam Firstenberg, "Revenge of the Ninja," (USA: Cannon Film Distributors, 1983).

⁵⁷ Pericles Lewnes, "Redneck Zombies," (USA: Troma Entertainment, 1989).

⁵⁸ Greenberg, *From Betamax to Blockbuster*. p. 77.

film and TV enthusiasts to reengage with material, by seeing it in its intended form. The idea of the straight to video film shows the third of the key ways in which the VCR was utilised. It is important because of the way in which it liberates the VCR from merely being a vehicle cinematic or TV releases to reach new markets. With the rise of straight to video material, video could become a genre of its own, with its own market sensibilities and concepts. This proved a boon to producers, who could produce a wider range of niche materials and market it directly to consumers because those consumers now had a more direct means of accessing their product.

The reaction to this widened availability of material was not all positive. The VCR had emerged into a world where debates over content availability, especially relating to explicit material were already raging. In the United States, Ronald Reagan had won an overwhelming victory in the 1980 presidential election in part because of the backing of socially conservative Evangelical voters. In 1985, he set up the Meese Commission, comprising eleven prominent anti-pornography activists determined that pornography was indeed harmful to public health, and a threat to the traditional family. While the advent of the cheaply made straight to video film proved popular amongst rental markets, their niche focus in fields such as horror drew strong opposition and the diminutive label label “video nasty.” This term first appeared in the United Kingdom, where socially conservative activists within the National Viewers’ and Listeners’ Organisation protested the availability of what they deemed to be morally offensive materials. Following on from a campaign by conservative British social activist Mary Whitehouse, Westminster passed the Video Recording Act of 1984, requiring all videocassettes to be approved by the British Board of Film Censors, so offensive material could be appropriately labelled, and banned as needed.

Soon afterwards, Australian conservative religious activist and politician Reverend Fred Nile spent ten thousand dollars to bring Whitehouse to Sydney, in order to speak at an anti-pornography rally on the 29th of July entitled “Children at Risk.” At this rally she declared that

“The manifestation of video nasties is so totally evil it's beyond the imaginings of man.”⁵⁹ At this time, several socially conservative politicians had declared Australia to be “flooded by pornography.”⁶⁰ Over the course of the rest of the year, each state had created the *X* classification of films, designed for non-violent, but sexually explicit material. These materials could not be screened publicly, be could be rented and sold through video stores to persons over eighteen years of age. This is demonstrative of reactionary attitudes towards the power that the VCR granted to the consuming public. While there was a clear demand for explicit material by responsible and consenting adults, the VCR became not just an instrument of liberation, making the consumer the “master of the television,” but a symptom of a “selfish and destructive society which has no future”, wherein explicit materials could be easily and repeatedly accessed by anyone.⁶¹

While the VCR had enabled the consumer to make more choices, not all of these choices were legitimate. Outside of the legitimate commercial sphere, the VCR and videotapes also proved to be popular with illicit markets, through VCR theft and smuggling, as well as the field of video piracy. A *Canberra Times* article from 1984 reported that because of their ease of transport, anonymity, and resale price, 99% of successful burglaries in houses that contained a VCR would involve the theft of the device, and that two VCRs were stolen in Canberra each week.⁶² Video piracy, also referred to as “bootlegging” was a massive underground industry whose true value has never been accurately estimated. However, sources from as early as 1980 show that it was a lucrative field for those involved. A 1980 raid in North Sydney, when VCR penetration was sparse, seized \$150,000 worth of tapes and equipment, including copies of *Star Wars*, and several R-rated films, neither of which had enjoyed a legitimate home video release.⁶³ This also extended into

⁵⁹ Anonymous, "Concern over 'Flood of Pornography'," *The Canberra Times*, 1 May 1984. p. 3.

⁶⁰ Ibid. p. 3

⁶¹ "Pornographic Video Movies," *The Canberra Times*, 8 August 1984.

"Remember Children, Says Anti-Porn Crusader," *The Canberra Times*, 30 July 1984. p. 7.

⁶² "VCRs: Fastest Selling and Fastest Stolen," *The Canberra Times*, 14 October 1984. p. 8.

⁶³ "Film Tape Racket," *The Canberra Times*, 22 February 1980. p. 7

pornography. In December of 1984, ten months after the instituting of the X classification of films, the chief censor of the Film Censorship Board stated that approximately 33% of all video sales in Australia were of banned material that nonetheless remained easily available.⁶⁴ The reasons for this were deemed to be twofold; the first was that customer demand remained high, but also that it was an easy demand to meet. Videotapes were easily transported, and easy to reproduce *en masse*. Theoretically it could be done by importing a small number of master tapes from which to make copies locally. The proliferation of bootlegging shows a parallel with the rise of home video. As home video's rise can be attributed to its provision of a cheaper alternative to the cinema with more range than either, bootlegged material offered a similar promise; often being cheaper than legitimately released videotapes, and not being limited to the range of legitimately released material.

It was not just the home environment which could take on aspects of a cinema. Businesses such as pubs, clubs, and restaurants began to use domestic VCRs to screen films to their patrons for free. These screenings were legal, provided that the right license fees were paid, which amounted to \$1000 per month. Letters written by angry video store owners outlined their clear objections to the practice, which sometimes included showing films shortly before their official home video release.⁶⁵ The Australian Video Retail Association, who represented these stores and their owners, took issue with this development, as they estimated that they were losing \$750,000 per month in rentals from this screening practice.⁶⁶ This is emblematic of the struggles over the power of the VCR. While video stores had forged their place between broadcasters and cinema utilising the convenience of the device, other businesses were now using it to increase the pull of their own businesses at the expense of video stores.

⁶⁴ Howard Conkey, "'Virtually Impossible' to Halt Porn-Tape Imports," *ibid.*, 13 December 1984. p. 3.

⁶⁵ Peter Nagy, "Letters to the Editor," *Video Trader*, 5 July 1993. p. 5.

⁶⁶ Anonymous, "AVRA Acts on Public Performance Screenings," *ibid.*, 01 December 1991. p. 7

The VCR not only changed the relationship between the producers and the consumers, but it changed the nature of distribution from one of broadcast to one of specific content selection, both through the ability to time shift content out of its broadcast schedule, and also to rent or purchase prerecorded tapes. This is one of the most important effects of the VCR, in that it alters the place of the consumer within the film and TV entertainment market through offering greater choices. As such, the video store, with its constantly available titles represented a key threat to the existing paradigm, through its simple provision of an alternative to the existing landscape where one either watched what was available or turned off their sets.

Chapter 3: The VCR in the Domestic Sphere

The introduction of the VCR into the home represented a fundamental change in the nature and use of the television, as well as expanding the agency its user had over the domestic space, through its ability to display user-selected content on the television screen. This change came from the control of the imagery presented on the screen, and the development of home theatre. As the ability to screen content became more impressive, what people watched on their VCRs changed irreversibly. The major change the VCR brought into the home came from the rise of the home videocassette archive, wherein VCR users could amass their own cassettes to be watched as they saw fit. These took the form of prerecorded cassettes, as well as content recorded by the user usually from television broadcasts. Cassettes could now be used for specific needs as they arose, from instructional, niche entertainment, or even as a babysitter for small children. It was these two factors which led to the VCR's wide effects on the home and the family.

Cultural theorist Paul Virilio posits that before the VCR, the television served not so much as an appliance as an architectural feature; a type of window through which a person looked out onto the world, through the television's reception and display of broadcasts.⁶⁷ As such, the VCR represented a significant enhancement to this ability, wherein the control over this screen meant that one could now further control interaction with the wider world, through the ability to endlessly repeat certain moments in time as they appeared on the screen, be they scripted programs, or significant sports matches which had proven themselves to be popular sellers on home video. The television was now further enabled to be the *sine qua non* in home entertainment. Because the VCR could easily screen pre-recorded films for a cheap price, the viewing space could become a proxy

⁶⁷ Cynthia Schneider and Brian Wallis, "The Third Window: An Interview with Paul Virilio," in *Global Television* (Cambridge, Mass: Wedge Press and MIT Press, 1988). p. 189.

cinema, in a manner similar to how it was seen in the 1950s when television sets first appeared in people's houses. At that time, the promise of television was that it would make the domestic viewing space "just like the pictures."⁶⁸ Soon after the introduction of the VCR in the 1980s, this idea was repeated as people's lounge rooms became the scene of impromptu gatherings whereby people would have film nights based on titles that they either owned or had rented.

At the same time, because of the VCR's new alternative to broadcast television, television networks were experiencing a downturn in advertising revenue. In 1979, Australian network television was at its peak rate of viewership, with 55.4% of people watching it on any given evening. By 1987, it had achieved a low of 51.4%. Much of this downturn occurred in the areas of Friday and Saturday night programming, as well as children's programming, both of which were areas into which video had made significant inroads.⁶⁹ In response to these statistics, editor of *Media Information Australia* Professor Henry Meyer stated that "the tyranny of you either must watch this or watch nothing has disappeared, because half the viewers can go round the corner and hire a video."⁷⁰ This is key to the idea of the expansion of consumer agency through the VCR, because the VCR offered an alternative use for one's television beyond the binary of either watching broadcast television or watching nothing. An example of this is in the Hobart market, wherein one only had access to two television channels, Channel Nine, and the ABC. On nights when Channel Nine broadcast Don Lanes's *The Don Lane Show*, rentals in Tasmanian video stores rose dramatically.⁷¹ This idea of video as an alternative was not confined to regional Australia. In *TV Week*, advertisements ran next to the television guide, with slogans like "When there's nothing on TV, watch nothing on Bo Derek" as a means of advertising the recent home video release of her

⁶⁸ Arrow, *Friday on Our Minds*. p. 30.

⁶⁹ Diedre Macken, "Why More Australians Are Switching Off Network TV," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 07 October 1987. p. 1.

⁷⁰ Ibid. p. 1.

⁷¹ Anonymous, "A Feast of Family Fare," *TV Week*, 05 November 1983. p. 29.

film *Bolero* (1984).⁷² This consumer migration to the VCR indicated a rise of consumer agency, because not only were drops in broadcast ratings evident, but video rental could meet specific consumer needs more readily than broadcast television.

While the process of renting a cassette was kept simple, the ability to utilise it was not always so. When the VCR first entered into people's homes, it was a technologically complex device with a strong barrier to entry by the standards of the time. It was required to be plugged in to the existing home infrastructure, and then tuned in to the available channels. From there, its operation was perceived as difficult by the population, and this difficulty became popular fodder for opinion columnists, one citing that the timer by which one could set their VCR to record automatically was "frustratingly hard to master."⁷³ An 1982 Sound and Video column in the *ACT Times* proclaimed that the video recorder needed an interpreter in order to be of any use. This was not just because an older television would not easily connect to the device, but also because the manuals were perceived to be unintelligible.⁷⁴ Consumer columns in other publications also warned of the technical knowhow required to operate a VCR, such as *TV Week's* three week series of articles in 1983 informing their readers of how to purchase the right VCR without technical understanding, as well as how to play, record, buy and rent videotapes. The articles warned potential buyers to think of buy a VCR the same way they would buy a car, asking "Do you simply wish to get from A to B, or do you want to achieve the same, but in comfort and with all mod cons?"⁷⁵ Being aware of this, the marketing of VCRs often focused on the ease of use ahead of many of the technical abilities. A key example of this is a 1981 ad for a Sharp VCR, whose top qualities were listed prominently. Number one was that it was easy to clean, and number two was that it was "simple to use." Another ad from the same year by Phillips outlined that their VCRs

⁷² "Advertisement: Watch Nothing on Bo Derek," *TV Week*, 06 April 1985. p. 32.

⁷³ Meryl Constance, "It's Time You and Your VCR Sat Down and Had a Little Chat," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 09 February 1989. p. 4.

⁷⁴ Richard Scherer, "Video Recorders Need an Interpreter," *The Canberra Times*, 26 April 1982. p. 8

⁷⁵ Webster, "Videos - Everything You Need to Know and a Little Bit More, Part 2." p. 14

were easy to use, and had a phone line one could call in order to get help. In addition to these, multiple retailers and rental stores such as Rentlo and Radio Rentals offered installation, to avoid this problem for consumers. This shows a fundamental idea behind the conception of technology in the Australian market; that most people wanted simplicity from their leisure device, and that technical achievements were often the domain of the technophiles.

Beginning in the 1990s, the expansion of consumer agency that the VCR represented took the form of an increased swing towards purchases of videocassettes as opposed to their rental, which had until then been the primary means of people's engagement with prerecorded tapes. This occurred because of a combination of factors; primarily because cheaper unit prices and more affordable large screen televisions made owning films a more appealing and practical idea. Barbara Klinger attributes this to a growing cinephile culture, enabled by the easy access to rented titles. As people were able to access more, they wanted a closer relationship with the films they enjoyed, which *Time* magazine characterised as "having a long term relationship with a film as opposed to a one night stand."⁷⁶ This is elaborated upon by Spigel, who posits this as a democratising of the film collecting hobby, allowing people without great amounts of money or technical knowledge to enjoy films in a similar manner. The focus on owning films, wherein consumers invest more in their cinematic habit revealed a shift in the mindset of the film consumer populace, moving to embrace film.

It is important to note that while there was great development in the content displayed by the television, the early nineties saw a fundamental change in the display apparatus itself through the rise of home theatre. Since the beginning of television's presence in the home in the 1950s, it remained distinct from cinema, because people perceived cinema as a place where a film was not only watched, but experienced. The picture was larger, and in a darkened space, allowing the viewer to focus on the screen, seeing every detail, and the sound surrounded the audience, creating an

⁷⁶ Klinger, *Beyond the Multiplex*. p. 187.

immersive atmosphere for the audience members. This was a space especially geared to the immersing of audiences in the films they watched. Comparatively, the television was a smaller screen, in a domestic space. When the television was first introduced, contention arose as to exactly how it should appear in the viewing space. An early arrangement was for people to set up rows of seats in their viewing room, showing that fundamentally, people initially understood the television through the reference to the existing idea of cinema.⁷⁷ As such, home theatre represented the biggest change that the VCR had affected on the space of the home, because the VCR's ability to screen content on demand was turned into the ability to not just see a film, but to experience it in an increasingly cinematic manner. Through its ability to present films at the schedule of the user, it enabled the idea of cinema style screenings, albeit through the still limited presentation abilities of the home television. Even with the home theatre, the VCR could never completely supplant the cinema, but the addition of the home theatre offered consumers the ability to shift the cinema into the space of the home, in the same way that the VCR offered the ability to shift programs to more convenient times.

Much like home video itself, home theatre began as a technophile's expensive hobby with expensive and difficult to use items, as well as a division between "serious" users and others.⁷⁸ This began to shift as home theatre technology became more affordable and accessible to the Australian consumer, better allowing them to successfully mimic the cinema experience through replicating its environment with ease. Klinger describes the rise of home theatre as a quest for authenticity by film enthusiasts, citing early advertisements which promoted the idea that to view a film on video with home theatre enhanced the authenticity of the piece.⁷⁹ This implies that to watch without home theatre denied the viewer the director's intended film and replaced it with a small screen facsimile. In the advertising in Australia of the time, home theatres dominated a television room with their

⁷⁷ Arrow, *Friday on Our Minds*. pp. 31-33.

⁷⁸ Spiegel, *Make Room for TV*. p. 181.

⁷⁹ Klinger, *Beyond the Multiplex*. p. 40.

powerful effects. A now famous print ad for Maxell tapes which ran in both Australia and abroad shows the sheer force of the screened material making the lounge room look like a wind tunnel, as the viewer's hair is forced back and he is propelled back into his comfortable seat.⁸⁰ The interest in these systems did not just centre around the technical abilities, but rather the popular films which could be shown on the further enabled device. These often used films such as *Batman* (1989), *Terminator 2* (1991) and *Jurassic Park* (1993) as examples of their capabilities, all selling the idea not just of a more capable system, but rather the ability to bring the cinema experience into the home. In 1989, Richard Noakes, sales manager for Harmon-Kardon/JBL, a company which sold sound systems, stated that;

*"People should be aware that they are not only recreating music in the home theatre. For example, when you hear a thunderclap, you should feel it and sense it, not just hear it. A home theatre system should be quiet enough so that when you're supposed to be experiencing the sound of winter in a forest, you can hear the trees cracking in the wind without hearing background hiss. The system should also recreate the sound of birds and other natural sounds. The experience should always come forward... You're trying to recreate nature with electronics."*⁷²

This quote serves as a declaration of the abilities of a home theatre system, as more than just a way to display film, but also a way to bring the outside world in the home in an easily controlled and economically feasible manner through the addition of sound to the existing system. These ideas in tandem did not just alter the space of the home, but that of the neighbourhoods in which people lived. Suburbs which were hours away from nature scenes could then bring those scenes into their homes on demand, giving every house a potential ocean view through their television set.

⁸⁰ Anonymous, "Advertisement: Maxell Video Tape," *TV Week*, 02 November 1991. pp. 58-59.

The shift towards cheaper end units prices for videocassettes began with the home video release of *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (1982) in 1985. At this time, video cassettes were sold for approximately sixty dollars per unit. *Wrath of Khan* was designed to be sold for twenty five, as an experiment in how consumers would respond to sales of cheaper films. The popularity of the film and the wide diffusion of VCRs into people's houses meant that people were willing to spend money to own a film that they could potentially rent for \$5 as a new release.

The switch to buying copies of films to consumers also affected the filmic experience. A person did not just see and experience a film. They owned it, and could collect films into their own private libraries. Furthermore, the cassettes themselves could also become collectible commodities, adding value to the film they carried. This new accessibility had a profound effect on filmic cultures, wherein enthusiasts were now able to purchase non-bootlegged copies of their favourite films to watch as they saw fit. As a result, films with enthusiastic mainstream followings, such as the *Star Wars* Trilogy, or cult followings such as the Monty Python films, were subjected to intense watching by their fans. This level of engagement with a film was unprecedented, as one could watch a film as much as they wanted. This phenomenon took hold across much of the first world. As time went on, several filmmakers, who despite not attending any formalised film school, cited their owning of a VCR and the domestic availability of film as a source of their knowledge about film and filmmaking. Filmmakers such as Quentin Tarantino, Robert Rodriguez and Kevin Smith have all discussed how ready access to countless films through home archives has been a key part of their success as filmmakers.⁸¹ Furthermore, a culture of those who taped programmes from the television acted similarly, watching and rewatching their material to see the small details inserted by the production staff. A key example of this is the animated sitcom *The Simpsons*, where jokes were deliberately inserted for those who rewatched the episodes, and paused the tape so that momentary jokes called "freeze frame" gags would be clearly visible to the viewer. This had the effect of

⁸¹ Wasser, *Veni, Vidi, Video*. pp. 21-22.

engendering a relationship between the producer and the dedicated consumer, as show creator and pop culture enthusiast Matt Groening described *The Simpsons* as a “show which rewards people for paying attention.”⁸² Communities based around television viewing embraced this practice, which is significant because it shows the way that the VCR took the practice of watching television and made it more experiential in nature by adding additional activities.

One peculiar practice to come out of this increased familiarity was “film karaoke.”⁸³ This was an activity wherein people would turn down the volume of a film, or use a karaoke enabled VCR, and recite the lines of dialogue themselves. This practice is indicative of changing attitude towards films, where because of their newfound levels of access and control over the material allowed a far more intimate relationship between the viewer and the text. This made films a more participatory experience, wherein people did not just passively watch a film, but rather made their own new social experiences out of it.

The VCR also began to have a place within the family. As people grew more accustomed to the technology, scheduled family time often became a time for families to watch videotapes, the selection of which became an activity in itself. Furthermore, the television had now increased its ability to be a means of occupying children for otherwise busy parents. Since its integration into the domestic space in the 1950s, it had been regarded as a means of occupying children, thus keeping them out of trouble and reducing parental effort in monitoring them.⁸⁴ Furthermore, it also had a place as a means of instilling proper behaviour, as access to the television was normally controlled by the parents, who could use it as incentive for completions of chores and homework. However at the same time as the release of child centric video content, there arose the risk of inappropriate content, such as the dreaded video nasties, making their way onto the screen for the children, similarly necessitating a monitoring of content by parents. Social conservative activists focused on

⁸² Ted Anthony, "Groening Tips America's Sacred Cows," *The Columbian*, 29 April 1999. p. 3.

⁸³ Klinger, *Beyond the Multiplex*. pp. 183-186.

⁸⁴ Spigel, *Make Room for TV*. p. 45.

this risk factor in the activism against the VCR, as it was argued that children would misuse the content choice allowed by the VCR and screen inappropriate videos for themselves, possibly causing them psychological harm.⁸⁵

Soon after pre-recorded videocassettes became a major force in entertainment, videos designed exclusively for children emerged. Often made by organisations such as the BBC and the ABC, popular properties such as *Bananas in Pyjamas* and *Thomas the Tank Engine* had episodes transferred onto videocassettes to be released to the public. These tapes were often sold to the public at rates cheaper than most other prerecorded cassettes, becoming more enticing to the buyer and easier to sell in groups.⁸⁶ In addition to entertainment titles for children, there were also educational titles. From the early eighties people had recognised the educational potential of the VCR, with plans to place video players in schools, with prerecorded educational content to engage with students in a way that their normal classroom may have been unable to do.⁸⁷ But these titles were also be sold to parents on the idea of that a habit of watching educational programs would make their children more aware of the world. In 1985, National Geographic and Encyclopaedia Britannica began to release catalogues of documentary content to Australian audiences. This is key to its ongoing integration and legitimacy within society, in that the VCR had not only become a popular means of entertainment, but also a facet of family life, in that it was a means of recreation, as well as a potential labour saving tool.

What Australians watched on the television through the VCR varied greatly. Before the switch to selling through in the 1990s, the tapes purchased by Australians tended to be either recordings of live events such as concerts or sports matches, niche entertainment videos, or those which served a more specific purpose such as instructional films, or children's films, whose purpose was often to occupy children for busy parents, allowing them to place the their child in front of the

⁸⁵ Debbie Cameron, "The 'Anti-Porn Priestess' Speaks," *The Canberra Times*, 3 August 1984. p. 3

⁸⁶ Anonymous, "Advertisement: Children's Videos," *TV Week*, 03 November 1991. p. 71.

⁸⁷ Leighton and Leighton, "School Libraries: A Changing Trend." pp. 125-126.

television for the duration of the tape. What many of these categories had in common was that they had content which would have been be hard to find on television when needed, but may also had proven hard to rent. An example of this is the surprising sales of the Australian Opera's home video releases after their release in 1988, designed to be played with the increasingly popular home theatre systems.⁸⁸ These initial releases as well as subsequent releases did well, as productions of Gilbert and Sullivan musicals, and concerts ranging from the Three Tenors to Janet Jackson routinely featured in Video Trader's section on top sell through titles. Furthermore, these concert tapes were often released with enhanced audio, making them ideal for the growing realm of home theatre. However, after the industry's switch to focus on selling films as opposed to renting them, the major sellers became the year's prominent film releases, which people wanted to see again, usually in their new home cinema setting. Even though these films were widely available through video stores, people sought their own copies for their home libraries.

However, what people hired on video was different. Approximately half of all rentals by Australian consumers were of new release material, which had been at the cinema less than a year before.⁸⁹ This is arguably similar to the time shifting employed on television, but applied to the realm of cinema as people would use new release films to catch up on films they had missed during their theatrical run. Importantly, this behaviour led to a decrease in the amount of time between a theatrical release and the release onto home video. The remainder of Australians' rentals were divided up between classic films, children's titles and television series which had been released onto video. The films which were the most purchased were not popular titles for hiring, showing a fundamental difference in the way Australian consumers approached their video habits.

Recorded material was different from these, primarily because it served a different purpose. A 1984 study by AC Nielsen showed that the most recorded shows were serialised popular

⁸⁸ David Frith, "Culture Is Alive and Well on Tape," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 08 May 1988. p. 4

⁸⁹ Anonymous, "Revealing Stats from A.V.R.A.," *Video Trader*, 9 December 1991. p. 8.

programs such as *Hill Street Blues* and *Days of Our Lives*.⁹⁰ Due to their serialised nature and at times inconvenient scheduling, missing one episode would place the viewer behind the running story lines with no means of finding what they had missed. As a result, the VCR proved a tool of liberation from television scheduling, because rather than risk missing out on popular programmes, people could now record them and watch as they saw fit.

The VCR's utility within a household was arguably its most important attribute. The 1980s saw an increase in the amount of hours worked by Australians, because more women entered the labour market, and more hours were being demanded of those already in the workforce.⁹¹ This left people with less leisure time than they had the previous decade, with potentially more disposable income. As a result of this, the ability to exert control over one's diminishing leisure time became paramount, which is what the VCR offered to its users. Wasser argues that increased participation in the workplace assisted the VCR's early sales, as those who were now working saw the VCR through the eyes of their jobs, characterising it as a time organiser as opposed to just an object of leisure.⁹²

This control was the main feature which was advertised to prospective buyers when the VCR was first released; to watch what they wanted, when they wanted. Most important was the ability to preset the VCR to record a program when the user would be away from the device. Sharp's VC7700, released in 1981 boasted the ability to record up to seven different programs up to seven days in advance.⁹³ Because of this technological innovation, VCR users no longer had to arrange themselves around potentially restrictive broadcast schedules. This was a feature which would remain a key component of the VCR and its marketing. While the setting of the automated schedule would remain a constant feature, over time other means of scheduling recording would

⁹⁰ "Soapies Most Taped US Shows," *The Canberra Times*, 14 May 1984. p. 19.

⁹¹ Alastair Greig, *The Australian Way of Life: A Sociological Introduction* (South Yarra, Vic: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013). p. 47.

⁹² Wasser, *Veni, Vidi, Video*. p. 200.

⁹³ Anonymous, "Advertisement: The Sharp VC7700 Front-Loading Video Recorder," *TV Week*, 04 July 1981. p. 48.

appear. An early example of this was Phillips' barcode system. This system consisted of a series of barcodes for popular programs being placed in large advertisements within newspapers and magazines, while simultaneously having the remote control function as a barcode reader. This feature did not last, and was later supplanted by the non-proprietary G-Code. For this, each transmission would carry a buried signal which a VCR could be programmed (Through entering a 12 digit code available in all TV guides) to detect this and record automatically. This shows that as prerecorded video developed and evolved, so too did the technology around home recording of broadcast media, constantly evolving to make the technology more accessible to the user.

These two factors in tandem altered the viewing space in the home irrevocably. Now, not only did people have the means to watch what they wanted, when they wanted, but the growth of the home archive meant that the VCRs users possessed this content, without having to visit a video store to rent it. This power meant that depending on what cassette one played through the television, the viewing room could become a cinema, a concert hall, sports stadium, or a room with a view upon any vista the user wanted, when they wanted it. In addition to changing the layout of the room, it could also change the layout of one's personal timetable, as personal time no longer needed to be arranged around television schedules, and a two hour film could take up a whole day through repeated viewings as the user saw fit.

Chapter 4: The Legacy of the VCR

Today the VCR has vanished from common use, having been replaced by the DVD player, and the DVD's replacement BluRay. Ultimately the rise of digital media was what caused the end of the VCR, most notably the Digital Versatile Disc (DVD). The DVD was however not the first digital media to compete with the VCR. In 1993, the Video CD (VCD) format was developed, which placed a feature presentation on a compact disc identical to those used for music. However, the format was inherently unreliable, as features were limited to seventy four minutes without degrading image and sound quality, and its ease of piracy made distributors unwilling to invest in the format, which rendered it unprofitable in the long term.⁹⁴ Comparatively, the DVD released in Australia in 1996 could hold hours of content, multiple stereo audio tracks, improved screen quality, and the size of the individual disc and its casing meant that building a collection of films required less volume than videocassettes.⁹⁵ But of those features, the most significant one was that of the increased content capabilities per disc, because it allowed for high content discs. As an example, one VHS tape would normally hold two episodes of a forty four minute television programme, while a single DVD would hold four episodes, as well as potential bonus content which allowed the consumer to become more engaged with the material they watched and potentially its creators. This new economic reality meant that it would then be feasible for entire television series to be sold on DVD without taking up excessive room in a warehouse, shop shelf or consumer's home. This made distribution of television programs onto home media a key part of the distribution of television programs, in the same way that home video became a key part of feature film distribution.

⁹⁴ Paul McDonald, *Video and DVD Industries* (London: British Film Institute, 2007). pp. 53-55.

⁹⁵ Ibid. pp. 59-61.

In Australia, consumers took to the DVD with haste, relative to their adoption of the VCR approximately twenty years earlier. Phillipa Meppem, product manager for Sony stated that “[DVD] has been the fastest pick-up of any technology introduced into the Australian market.”⁹⁶ In 2002, five years after their entry into the Australia’s consumer market, DVD players were in 25% of homes, and DVDs themselves represented 59% of the rental market.⁹⁷ However, in 1995 when the technology was still in its infancy and had not yet entered the market, video retailers were skeptical of its ability to penetrate the market, stating that consumers would not be interested in a device which did not allow for recording of material.⁹⁸ Instead, the DVD was marketed and perceived as a device which offered authenticity to one’s entertainment, as the cleared picture and sound would mean that the experience of watching material was more “authentic.”

This ease of information transfer is perhaps the most important way in which the VCR was improved upon technically by its successors. While the DVD was able to put more content into smaller physical media, the use of home computers combined with downloading and streaming services (both legal and not) have removed the physical considerations entirely, making an archive appear as characters on the screen as opposed to titles on a shelf. This loss of the physical has also led to the loss of the video and DVD rental store. The Blockbuster Video chain, the largest in the world filed for bankruptcy in 2013, leaving what remains of the market in the hands of smaller chains, and independent stores.⁹⁹ They have been supplanted by online distribution companies such as Netflix and iTunes, who charge users for access to their material, utilisable in any place with a sufficient internet connection.

⁹⁶ Lyall Johnson, "The DVD Takes Off in Record Time," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 October 2002. p. 12.

⁹⁷ Ibid. p. 12.

⁹⁸ Anonymous, "A Cautious Response to DVD," *Video Trader*, 13 March 1995. p. 8

⁹⁹ Adam Turner, "Blockbuster Us to Close Last Video Rental Stores in 2014," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, <http://www.smh.com.au/digital-life/computers/blogs/gadgets-on-the-go/blockbuster-us-to-close-last-video-rental-stores-in-2014-20131107-2x30g.html>.

The screen cultures which the VCR helped to evolve have also developed further. While the early days of freeze frame jokes deepened the relationship between the producer as well as the product and the consumer, the increased ease with which larger amount of media can be acquired and consumed have meant that the practice of freeze framing to look for small details has increased as has the expectation of this practice from producers, with entire fan communities looking for minute deliberate details in popular television programmes in order to be better engaged with the material.

Nonetheless, the VCR still sees use, albeit in a niche. Not all films which were on VHS and Betamax were transferred to DVD and other digital media, and as a result VHS themed film festivals have come into existence.¹⁰⁰ These have largely consisted of public displays of the notorious “Video Nasties” combined with other banned or infamous films. One of the most prominent of these is the semi regular Video Hate Squad screening in the Alamo Drafthouse in Austin, Texas. They screen cheap and “over the top” straight to video films that they feel consumers “will high five to” in marketing that emphasises the nostalgic appeal of the VHS format over the quality of the films themselves.¹⁰¹ So while the VCR has been supplanted technologically, it remains today an object of nostalgia for those who seek out the specific VCR experience, revelling in the filmic imperfections not authentically present on digital media. This is similar to the way in which cinema became primarily experiential when one of its key attractors (the accessibility of media) was improved upon by a more viable alternative, in that they began to sell an experience as opposed to just a product.

Overall, the VCR in Australia was defined by its effects on consumer agency to affect matters economic, social and domestic, through its ability to offer people an easy alternative to what they saw on the television. Through the ability to pick this alternative to existing media, the

¹⁰⁰ Josh Johnson, *Rewind This!* (Imperial PolyFarm Productions, 2013).

¹⁰¹ Ralph Hardesty, "Video Hate Squad Brings VHS-Only "Classics" to Austin," Culture Map Austin, <http://austin.culturemap.com/news/entertainment/07-04-11-10-00-video-hate-squad-brings-VCR-only-classics-to-austin/>.

relationships between consumers, distributors and producers were irrevocably altered as each attempted to utilise the new technology and the alternatives it offered to the best of their ability. Consumers could now watch what they wanted at the time of their choosing, as well as replace the role of distributor through the ease of video piracy.¹⁰² Distributors had new ways to sell their material to consumers, through the rise of the video rental store which meant that their films did not have to gain airtime on a television network or in a cinema. Producers were then less beholden to distributors, as they could now manufacture their own videocassettes for sale in any number of competing retail stores. Within the home, the newfound control over the displayed content gave the device an entirely new use as a proxy cinema, and enhanced existing usages of television, allowing it to change the viewer's place within the world. Together, these started a trend of increased consumer control which continues to develop today through continued rise of digital media.

¹⁰² Tom O'Regan, "Remembering Video: Reflections on the First Explosion of Informal Video Markets through the VCR," *TV and New Media* 13, no. 5 (2012). pp. 383-384.

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