

Cruel Remotes: Reading a 1998 Sharp Series RRMCG0241AJSA VCR RCD

Brent Strang, State University of New York at Stony Brook

In the late 1980s, for the first time in its history, there were more buttons on the interface of a VCR remote control device (RCD) than on the machine itself. Not only did this make the home theatre experience more recumbent, but since several functions were now only locatable on the interface, the RCD made itself indispensable for the full functioning of the VCR. It wasn't long after that the RCD's interface became littered with buttons, adding complexity and functionality that substantially thickened – made obtrusive even – the boundary between user and machine. In the history of its design, the RCD's interface turns from simple to complicated to streamlined, with that middle period of 1990s remotes standing out like a sore thumb. What, then, can a close reading of its interface add to what we know about the 1990s home theater experience?

As Barbara Klinger and William Boddy have well established, the home theatre system was advertised during the 1990s and 2000s as a site of mastery, constructing a conspicuously white, male ideal of freedom and cultural capital acquired through state-of-the-art technology. The profusion of buttons gels with this picture; if we think of each button as an electronic servant, then my VCR remote has 47 to do my bidding. Who in their moment of acquisition — standing at the electronics counter and choosing between two otherwise equal VCRs — would willingly choose the one with *less* buttons, in effect choosing less control?

In fact there are a number of reasons why someone would have chosen an RCD with a simpler interface. VCRs proved difficult to program, particularly for women and older demographics (Cohen & Cohen). Manufacturers, moreover, were well aware that the “clutter, awkwardness, and incompatibility” of these remotes was a problem, which they had tried to remedy by introducing more streamlined and intuitive Universal remotes (Rothstein). Yet these innovations failed to change the dominant course in RCD interface design, with its continued promise of ‘total functionality’. Indeed, this course continued well into the 2000s until such time as these features could be displaced onto the screen's GUI or contextual menu.

A closer inspection of the material interface underscores the contrast between the virtual and actual remote — its potential during the consumer's moment of acquisition and its reality in the user's experience, respectively. A telling 1989 study of VCR use reveals that only a minority of users had knowledge of the VCR's full capabilities, much less used them; meanwhile, those who did “actually regressed from frequent and diverse applications soon after purchase...to a simpler and more predictable regimen” (Cohen & Cohen citing Lindlof, 138). With my 4 RCDs sitting together on the coffee table like a command console, I have 157 servants at my disposal. Yet I've only become acquainted with 32 of them, signaling not only my ignorance but my incompetence, too.

Deciding to be less parochial, I reach out to my 1998 VCR RCD and behold some of its more exotic functions for the first time — ‘Zero Back’, ‘Skip Search’, ‘Tamper Proof’, a light-bulb icon...? — all functions I couldn’t decipher without pouring over the 44-page manual. Now, if I could only find where I put that manual...

The prospect that users would actually subject themselves to the labor of reading a 44-page instruction manual given the exhausted temporalities endured under late global capitalism is quite absurd. And so, our experience with this product is incomplete, opaque, frustrated, and lacking the satisfaction that attends competent use. Every glinting button that promises to enhance my freedom proves to be a claim on my attention, and so, too, do the dying batteries, the thick instruction manual, the purchase of a TV stand to store my equipment, the surround sound system to play it, the brackets to mount the speakers, the monster 14 gauge speaker wire, the wire tacks to line them, the VHS collection, the display stand to contain them, the couch to sit on, the remote caddy that slings over the arm rest to keep all my remotes in one place. We create for ourselves large ‘product webs’, Victor Margolin says, that ensnare us with demands of money, maintenance, know-how, and servicing. This webbing turns the home entertainment zone into something more like Mrs. Havisham’s quarters, making a mockery of technology’s so-called ‘freedoms’. The gulf between the virtual and actual RCD provides a poignant reflection of everyday practices, and reveals to average users like me another example of Lauren Berlant’s cruel optimism. Such objects of desire are clusters of promises, ‘fantasy bribes’ in our horizon that keeps us striving toward the ‘good life’ despite ever more evidence of diminishing returns. It is not mastery we find there on the couch, nor waste nor rest, but slow attrition, slow death — always just getting by — until the next toy glints the promise of the good life to carry us, cruelly, forward.