

Expansion and growth

Our Viperlib team was soon busy promoting the project at conferences and via email, and quickly received a tremendous response from vision scientists around the world. The Viperlib web site was launched on the unsuspecting world in August 2003.

The site grew rapidly and continues to develop and thrive: early in 2005, Viperlib passed the milestone of 2,000 images with over 3,000 registered users. Each month, the site regularly has around 2,000 unique visitors, who collectively manage to make 200,000 monthly hits. The statistics make fascinating reading. (Why is the site overwhelmingly popular in Japan one month and in Hungary the next? Why did usage suddenly leap on that Tuesday in February? Haven't people got anything better to do with their Sundays?) Detailed analysis of the statistics would be a rewarding project in itself.

Of all the problems we encountered in the early days perhaps the knottiest of all was the question of copyright. Many contributors kindly sent us images that they had scanned from journals and textbooks. Even if this practice is legal for 'your own personal use' it probably isn't legal to put such images on a web site like ours. For example, Holbein's painting of 'The Ambassadors' is of interest to people working in visual perception because of the image of a skull hidden by distortion at the bottom of the painting. The National Gallery in London, who own the painting have a photo of it on their web site and they hold the copyright for the photograph. I think that the painting itself is not subject to any copyright but taking your own photograph of the painting in the gallery is not allowed. The National Gallery allows 'personal use' of their image, defining 'personal use' as 'non-commercial, domestic use by an individual involving the making of only single copies of each digital image'. A quick search on *Google Images* reveals over 330 sites displaying the picture. A similar search for the Mona Lisa finds over 31,000 sites....

We took the decision early on that we must make sure that all our images were 'legal'. However dealing with issues of copyright, data protection, agreements, permissions, conditions of use and associated record-keeping has taken far more time than initially anticipated. Our advice to anyone undertaking a similar project would be not to underestimate the thorny issues around copyright and the time and organisation needed to obtain all the necessary permission and conditions of use.

Copyright legislation has clearly had great difficulty in keeping up with the rapid development in electronic media and communication in recent years. Although many publishers have been extremely helpful in granting blanket permission for inclusion of images they have published, not all publishers appreciate the value of an educational resource such as Viperlib and are extremely protective of 'their' material. One or two have refused permission outright, while others

insist that we obtain permission for each individual image, specifying full references for each. However, several have been exceedingly helpful and generous. For example, we have loaded many images from the *Journal of Vision* and *Perception*, thanks to the blanket permission offered by the publishers of these journals. Individuals are nearly always generous to a fault. Most will tell us to take whatever we want from their collections of images and demonstrations in return for a simple acknowledgement.

Nearly 90% of people who access the Viperlib site are using *Windows* software, with most of the others using Macintosh machines. Of course, with an academic constituency there will always be the odd UNIX user too. This generally poses few problems as all the common picture formats, jpeg., tiff., etc., can be handled by any system. Movie formats do pose some irritations, chiefly brought about by *PowerPoint's* inability to play *Quicktime* movies. We have searched long and hard to find a solution to this problem but we can't find any alternative to offering *Quicktime* movies in an alternative *PowerPoint*-friendly format.

How Viperlib works

Users who are looking for specific items can search for images by keyword, contributor, description, file format or filename. For those simply curious to see what is on offer, the images are categorised in subject areas to facilitate browsing through the collection. Each image is associated with metadata. Search results are presented as a series of thumbnail images (Figure 2) which can, if the user chooses, be accompanied with a brief description (Figure 3). Clicking on a thumbnail produces a full downloadable view with more detailed information (for example a full acknowledgement, the description, any references, links to sources of further information and perhaps some additional related images), (Figure 4). Users must register and accept conditions of use before gaining access to the full-size high-resolution images.

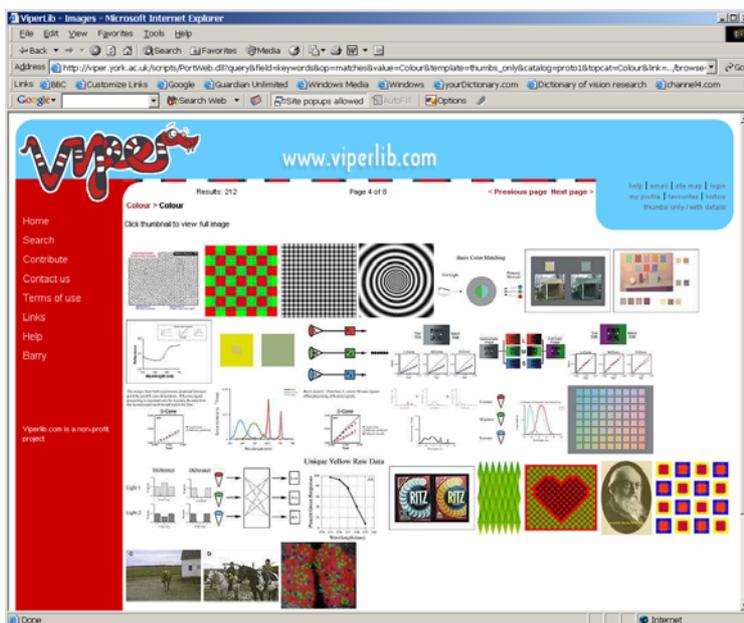


Figure 2. A search results in a series of thumbnail images



Figure 3. Thumbnails with a brief description

Very often the images in the collection come from individuals or organisations with their own web site containing other material of interest, so we have built up a useful collection of links to associated websites, journals, organisations and conferences in the field.

One key to the site's success is that it constantly changes (is there anything as frustrating as reading the words 'site last updated July 1995'). New material is always being added and we have an 'image of the week' on the home page, usually a new image of particular interest that has recently been added to the collection.

Makeover

To celebrate the first full year of Viperlib's existence, we launched a major redesign of the site, giving it a brand-new fresh look. Although distinctive features were retained to maintain the identity of the site, it now has a much more rounded and, we believe, stylish appearance. Dramatic improvements to functionality were incorporated. Browsing, searching, and navigation were improved, and the 'My profile' section greatly enhanced to allow users to customise their experience of Viperlib. Users can now manage a list of their favourite and recently viewed images, which can be readily accessed and quickly displayed by the user's preferred method.

Viper2go

Viperlib has quickly become a highly successful, shared international resource provided by experts for experts. However, as the project progressed, it became clear that the concept could be enhanced to create valuable e-learning materials. Viperlib images are accompanied by the briefest of details, which (while perfectly adequate for experienced vision scientists) can provide a rather sparse environment from the viewpoint of learners and non-specialists (Figure 5).

We have recently acquired a small grant from the Higher Education Academy's Psychology Network to utilise the potential of the site further by constructing value-added 'tutorials' from the raw ingredients of the Viperlib collection:

complete tutorial sessions targeted at undergraduate or postgraduate level. We think of these tutorials as being akin to a fast-food outlet, somewhere to pick up a ready made meal when you don't want to cook the ingredients yourself, and so we have dubbed the new venture 'viper2go', with, of course, its own viper2go logo (Figure 6) and its own T-shirt for contributors!. We are already preparing our first 25 tutorials and, if we can secure further funding, we are looking to expand 'viper2go' further.

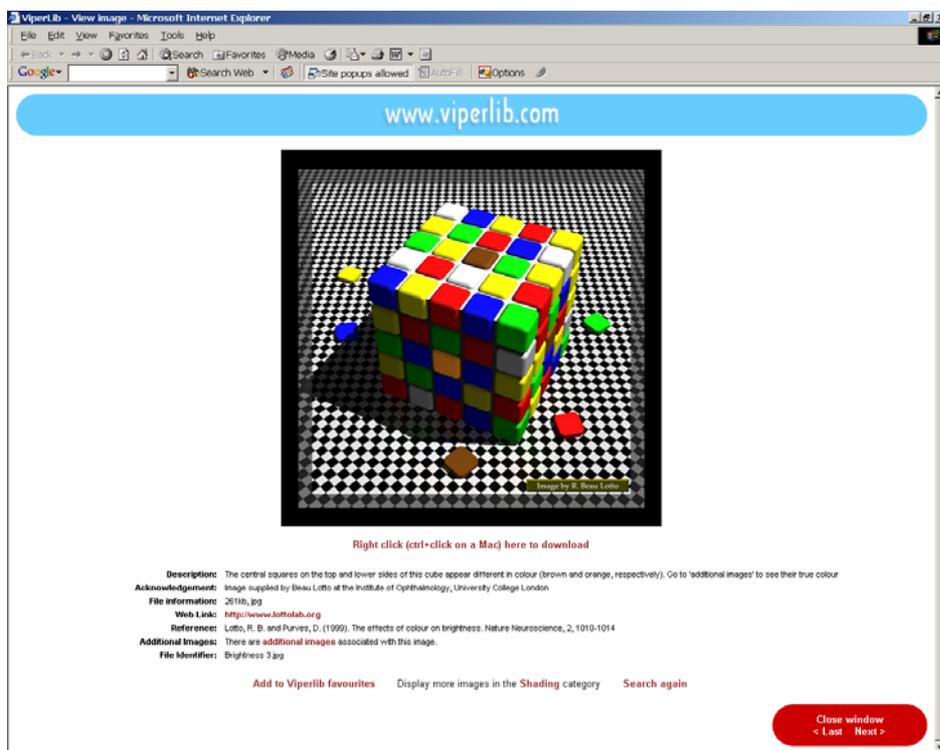


Figure 4. Clicking on a thumbnail brings up an image complete with a description of the image, details of its size and format, links to associated material and an acknowledgement of the author

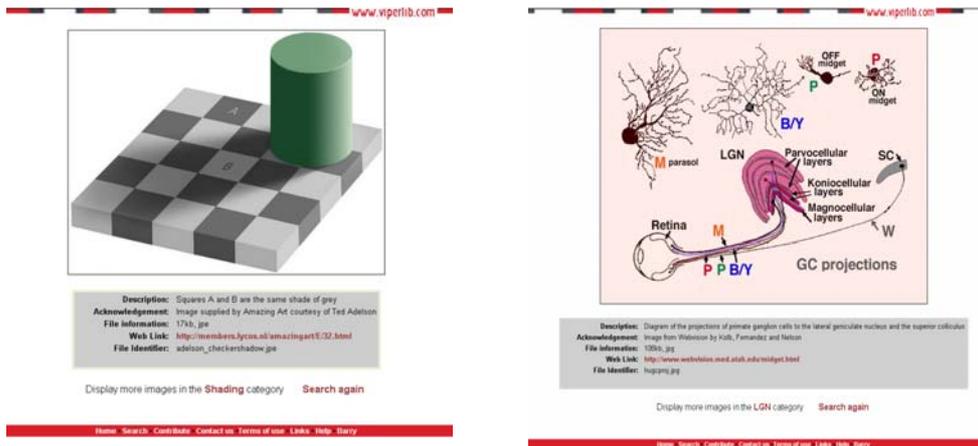


Figure 5. Typical images from the Viperlib collection



Figure 6. The new viper2go logo

Conclusion

You can visit the site at <http://www.viperlib.com>. Take a look to see what is available and let us know what you think. We have many plans for future development of the site but we welcome all ideas and comments (email: info@viperlib.com). If you see anything that's wrong, we need to know about that, too!

Viperlib is a non-profit project, no payment is made for material provided, and images are held only as a collection for use as an educational resource. Reproduction or distribution of items for commercial purposes is prohibited.

We have learned many lessons that might be of value to anyone who might want to set up such a resource in other subject areas. We would be happy to pass the information on, but it'll cost you a T-shirt...