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Dotted Landscape: BERGLUND CENTER FOR INTERNET STUDIES FELLOWSHIP REVIEW AND ANALYSIS PART 2



by Michael Geraci

Landscape 1: Middle Life on the Roads of Rural Oregon

Two things have been consistent throughout my life: cycling and technology. I received my first bike at the age of five. It was a purple, single-speed affair complete with a banana seat. It took me a year to grow comfortable enough to ride off, a young explorer along the residential streets of Northeast Portland. As years passed, I traded up bikes and eventually transported myself around the city within a 25-mile area of my home. Cycling was not just an expression of youthful freedom, but the gateway to employment and a social life. Even after learning to drive and gaining access to a car, I rode bikes. Typically accompanied by a small pack of friends, I rode as a means of recreation, exercise, and exploration in the city and its surrounding areas. It was commonplace to head out on a Saturday morning and ride 10-12 miles to fishing holes along the Columbia River, or to the peaks of Portland's Rocky Butte and Mount Tabor Park. Pedaling a bike wasn't just something I did, it was a part of me, both as I was then and as I am today.

I got my first computer at the age of 15. It was a Commodore 64, which I connected to a 13" black and white television. I began teaching myself the Basic programming language, mainly for the purpose of creating simple text-based adventure games. Working on the computer connected with some visceral part of my brain. Even within the limited confines of the Commodore's operating system and programming language, the simple logic structures and modularized functionality just made sense at a fundamental level. Never quite a stereotypical "computer geek," I relished the computer's ability to create new expressions of creativity and storytelling.

My affinity for technology grew in college where I learned to use the earliest models of the Macintosh computer, with its novel, graphical user interface and mouse. In the years following my undergraduate college experi-

ence, I launched a career creating educational multimedia titles using Apple's innovative HyperCard application. I was at the right place at the right time as computers became the center of media convergence. First I watched the widespread adoption of the CD-ROM for media storage and distribution and then the arrival of the Internet and World Wide Web as a platform for sharing information in an increasingly rich and engaging format. In 1995, I began creating websites with a text editor and the earliest versions of Photoshop, Adobe's flagship software.



Figure 3. A screen shot from Lernexpress, an early project created by the author in HyperCard.

While my use of computers and technology continued to grow, I found myself living in Western Washington County, raising a family, and always cycling. As middle age approached, I took to my bike in the early morning hours as a form of exercise and meditation. Riding alone or with a friend, the sunrise ritual of pedaling along the roads of the county that bisected farms and logging communities, I began to understand, and appreciate, how much this place meant to me. While I never really sought the opportunity to leave the Pacific Northwest, it became very clear to me as I pedaled over the years that I probably could not bear to ever leave this truly amazing part of the country.

Juxtaposed with my growing acknowledgement of place as a fundamental part of who I am, was the omnipresent garbage. The roadways that were becoming the passages of my life were dotted with the refuse of others, cast out of car windows and left to decompose, however slowly, in the natural environment. I remember asking myself over and over during my rides “how

do we live in such a beautiful place yet treat it so poorly?" Thus a seed was planted. I had found a subject for some future endeavor that would allow me to craft my own response and reconciliation for the conflict I witnessed along those miles of pavement.

In 2009, a budding relationship with an accomplished experimental filmmaker opened my eyes to experimental film as a new genre in art and expression. It was a new way to see the world and build a narrative around it with the layered complexity of poetry, image, sound, and personal reflection. I gained an appreciation and affection for the many non-traditional ways we have to share our experiences and bring to life the things that occupy our minds and souls. I didn't want to explore a new form of filmmaking, I wanted to see how the Web, now just a teenager, could become more than a platform for news and information. I wanted to delve into the ways that the Web could become the next platform for experimental storytelling and the conveyance of all aspects of our collective experiences as humans in an interconnected world.

My early inquiries in this realm turned up an interesting site hosted by Penguin Books in the United Kingdom. The We Tell Stories project sought to re-envision and re-tell the stories of six classic texts in a format that leveraged modern day technologies as more than just a vessel to hold the story but as a way to tell the story. The six stories on the site are told in ways that are unique to our digital lives. For example, the Charles Dickens classic, *Hard Times* [1] is told through infographics, a type of data visualization that has been around for hundreds of years, but has experienced a renaissance on the Web since 2008. Then, there is *Slice* [2] an adaptation of M. R. James' *The Haunted Dolls' House* told through a series of blog posts and tweets posted to the Web in 2008 by the story's characters. The one story that captured my attention and contributed to this germinating idea of mine was *The 21 Steps*, an adaptation of John Buchan's *The 39 Steps*, by Charles Cummings. [3] This story about an innocent bystander being swallowed up in an international mystery is told as a connected series of renderings and animations played out on a live Google Map of the United Kingdom and surrounding environs. With each segment of the story the viewer watches as the map changes position, zooms in and out of locations and plots the movement of the protagonist as his adventure unfolds (Note: recent changes to Google's mapping technology has rendered some or all of this story unusable. Such is the impact of change on the Web — a reality I am all too familiar with). All this was made possible through the growing availability of open source technologies on the Internet such as Google's powerhouse mapping platform. The 21 Steps represented how place — the setting for our stories — can be represented online and used as the digital text in today's modern form of storytelling.

Experiencing *The 21 Steps* was just the start of my Dotted Landscape project. It was not until I saw *The Wilderness Downtown* [4], a Web-based music video experience based on the Arcade Fire song *We Used to Wait* and a vision for how the modern Web could be transformed into a truly dynamic and personal storytelling platform. In *The Wilderness Downtown*, the user is asked to enter the address of his or her childhood home. What happens after that is a mesmerizing combination of filmmaking, animation, and programming played out in a geographical context that makes our own personal history the location of this compelling and inspirational story. I am not being hyperbolic when I say that this site changed my life and my understanding of what the Web represented as a platform for all of humanity to share its stories. It was the dawn of a new era in my personal life.

Landscape 2: A media educator shifts gears

In 1999, I started my career as an educator, teaching undergraduate courses in multimedia design, website development, and digital media production. This was still early on in the development of Internet technologies, so much of the curriculum I taught centered upon the creation of static Web-based presentations of content connected via traditional hyperlinked navigational systems. It was not until Macromedia (now Adobe) Flash started to find its way into mainstream websites that I was awakened to the idea that this platform was just getting started. I had not yet begun to appreciate what was possible with the technology I was teaching to students while feverishly attempting to stay current in my own knowledge and abilities.

Flash is a commercial application that quickly grew into a one-stop shop for interactivity, animation, and rich media experiences on the Web. I found myself pouring over books and online tutorials for hours before going into classes where I was educating students in the use of Flash. The curriculum focused on the creation and implementation of digital assets in Flash's timeline based user interface and ActionScript programming language. The Shockwave-Flash browser plug-in gave all Web surfers the capability to explore the rich environments that could be built in this format. In fact, the Shockwave-Flash plug-in found its way into the vast majority of all Web browsers and Internet connected devices and continues to be a viable technology for rich Internet applications (RIAs). [5] Flash provided a much-needed platform of development in many of my classes. I used it to teach animation, programming and website development for the first ten years of my career as a multimedia educator.

By 2009, Flash began to slowly fall out of favor as THE platform for rich media development. Technical advances on the Web and in modern browsers like Google Chrome and Mozilla Firefox combined with a growing lack of support for Flash content by major players like Apple and Google pointed to a

new future of Web development. It would be based upon freely available technologies like the now mature and robust JavaScript programming language and its myriad code libraries that enhance functionality such as jQuery [6] and Prototype [7]. In 2010, Steve Jobs himself released an open letter on Apple's website saying it was time to move beyond Flash. [8] My world as an educator was changing before my eyes. My students were keenly aware that learning



Flash was not the best use of their time, and they were right.

Figure 4. A photo of some of the many books on Flash that are no longer relevant.

With nowhere to go but forward, in 2011 I shelved my dozens of Flash texts and started exploring the depths of a new toolset that would find its way into most of my classes. My gradual command of technologies, from HyperCard and HTML in the 1990's on through Flash in the 2000's, always came through the creation of my own projects. The act of imagining an end product and actualizing it via trial and error with a set of tools and techniques is by far the best way for me to learn the finer points of media design and development.

In the spring of 2011 I made the decision to create the project that would use the new technologies I had started learning to make my personal reflections about life in Washington County and all of its litter the centerpiece of a scholarly investigation of the Web as a storytelling platform. This was the true genesis of Dotted Landscape and the start of a new chapter in my life as a media creator and educator.

The Berglund Center for Internet Studies at Pacific University put out its call for faculty fellowship proposals, and I jumped at the opportunity to gain some level of support for my new undertaking. My proposal [9] outlining the ideas and the motivation for the project was accepted. Beyond benefiting from the general support of the center, the fellowship allowed me to receive a course

release during the fall semester of 2011, essentially freeing up 8-9 hours per week for the 14-week term. Rather than walking into my Tuesday/Thursday course on intermediate Web design, I was riding along the rural roads of Washington County with my Canon Powershot SX230HS point-and-shoot camera snapping images of trash. Data collection had begun. After each ride I would return to my home and download the 20-30 images into Apple's iPhoto application, where I weeded out duplicates, made simple edits, and labeled each photo in such a way that it could be easily integrated into the larger project that had yet to take shape.

The Powershot camera uses global positioning technology to embed geographical data into each photo, including its longitude, latitude and altitude. iPhoto has a "locations" feature that taps into Google's mapping technology and plots the geographical position of photos. Seeing my images appear on iPhoto's map-based user interface was proof that I could eventually build my own system for displaying the trash images on a Google map. After the ten rides were complete and the 133 documented items were ready for production, I immersed myself in the world of Google Maps and JavaScript programming.

As I write this, I am halfway through my first class in Web programming that relies entirely on JavaScript and its associated code libraries. The class moves much slower than its Flash/ActionScript predecessors, but it's clear to me and the students that the skills gained will serve them for well for many years. When a new language or technology does come along to supplant JavaScript, as is more than likely, I feel confident that the students will be more adaptable because of having worked within an open source environment directly in the browser.

Also at this moment, Dotted Landscape is online, but is not quite complete. The bedrock coding is done, the user interface is designed and built on HTML 5 and CSS 3, and the mapping functionality is solid. What remains is the final collection of content that will serve as the first few "stories" or "histories" for selected pieces of garbage. When I set out on this project, I knew that I would not be the primary creator of the trash stories. My hope was, and still is, to engage members of the community to "adopt" a piece of trash and submit to me a piece of content that gives the selected item life and, in doing so, make it just a little more beautiful. I look forward to the day that I can share the site without hesitation. In the meantime I am already benefitting from the knowledge gained in the project's design and implementation.

Notes

[1] See: <http://www.wetellstories.co.uk/stories/week5/#cover>

[2] See: <http://www.wetellstories.co.uk/stories/week2/>

- [3] See: <http://www.wetellstories.co.uk/stories/week1/>
- [4] See: <http://thewildernessdowntown.com>
- [5] See: <http://www.adobe.com/products/flashruntimes/statistics.html>
- [6] See: <http://jquery.com>
- [7] See: <http://prototypejs.org>
- [8] See: <http://www.apple.com/hotnews/thoughts-on-flash>
- [9] See: http://www.dottedlandscape.org/pdf/geraci_fellowship_proposal.pdf