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## Dotted Landscape: Berglund Center for Internet Studies Fellowship Review and Analysis Part 1

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## Dotted Landscape: Berglund Center for Internet Studies Fellowship Review and Analysis Part 1

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# Dotted Landscape: BERGLUND CENTER FOR INTERNET STUDIES FELLOWSHIP REVIEW AND ANALYSIS PART 1



by Michael Geraci

## A Digital Narrative Project

It's difficult to describe my Dotted Landscape project as anything other than a "web site about trash". In fact, when asked about this endeavor by friends and colleagues, there is a consistent, awkward pause, while I try to formulate a response that is worthy of everything that this Web site represents to me without overwhelming them with the entire back story and the thinking that rests below its surface. Before going into the myriad details about what this project really is, I will describe it in its simplest form in hopes that you will continue reading so that you will gain a certain appreciation for the degree to which this project plumbed the strata of my life since its inception.

The project website uses a display based on Google Maps as its primary interface. On this series of maps, I have plotted the location of actual garbage that I found along the roadsides of rural Washington County, Oregon — the county in which I have lived and worked since 1991. I set out to document the litter during the fall of 2011 over the course of ten bike rides, performed alone, that skirted the Western edges of the county. The rides covered 175 miles of public roadways. I snapped nearly 140 images of unique garbage lying in plain site and on public land with the aid of a GPS-enabled digital camera. By "unique" I mean that once a certain type of garbage, say a fast-food drink container, was documented, say a fast-food drink container, further encounters with that type were ignored.

The "unique" rule was not part of my original plan, but a mile or so into my first ride, around the cities of Banks and Roy, I came to the conclusion that documenting every piece of trash encountered during a 10-15 mile bike ride was going to be next to impossible. The amount of litter in our environment is simply overwhelming when you are aware of it. The alcohol containers alone,

on the routes that I surveyed, would have numbered in the thousands, and, in my estimation, if spread out along the entire 175 miles travelled, would have punctuated every 300-400 feet of road. The pervasiveness of alcohol containers along roadways was a sobering realization that I was not prepared for. Assuming that they found their way to the roadside from the windows of vehicles, they tell a kind of story that has deeper implications for residents and travellers in rural areas.

With each of the ten bike rides comprising one page (or context) of the Dotted Landscape site, a Google map in “terrain” mode shows the general area of the ride. The garbage encountered on the ride is plotted on the map with custom designed map markers. Clicking one of the markers opens a modified version of the “info window” that users of Google’s mapping service are familiar with. Styled with Google’s default “word bubble” shape, the pop-up windows provide summary information and a photograph of the actual item as it was found. Eventually a link will be included to a page telling the item’s “story.” This “back story” concept is central to the idea behind the project. It’s not just a site about garbage but a platform for the community to address their garbage and give it some life other than the one it has decomposing along the roadside. I want my fellow citizens to join me, in a virtual way, in making something slightly more interesting out of our detritus and this project is my attempt at enabling that conversation.

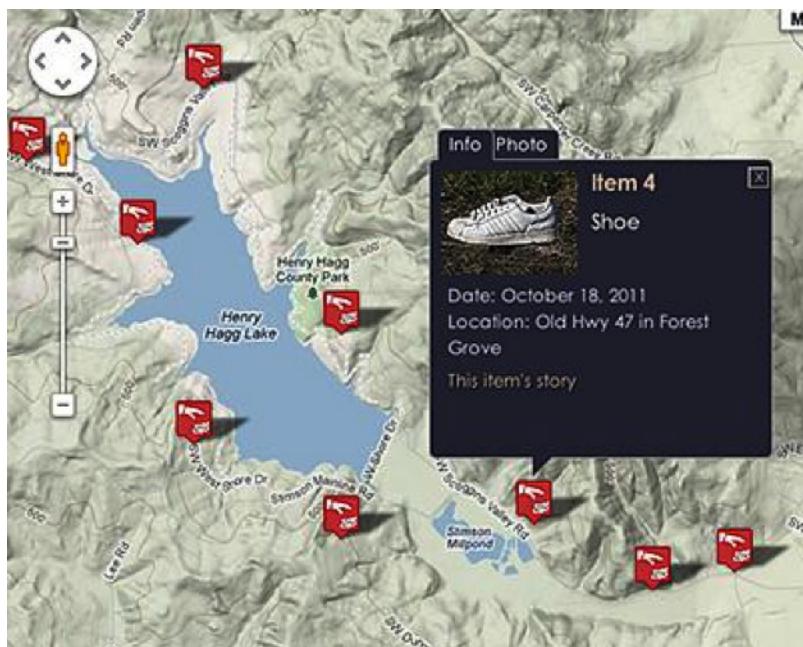


Figure 1. A screen shot of a map from <http://www.dottedlandscape.org>.

I located and implemented some open source tools for modifying the maps' info windows so that I could add a tabbed interface to them and style them in the overall aesthetic of the site, which eschews 'clean' lines and well-positioned elements in favor of the rough-edged and gritty nature of the subject matter I was featuring on the pages. That said, the graphic designer in me could not resist the need to select colors and set type in ways that enhance the experience and give it the slightest feeling of being intentionally crafted. Next to the map window on every page is a menu of all of the items plotted on the map in the order in which they were found during the ride. This is an interface element that affords users an alternate means of browsing the garbage found along that particular route. Clicking any of the listed items triggers the display of its info window in the map interface. This menu's generation and included functionality proved to be one of the project's first sizeable technical challenges for me. This will be addressed in section three of this document when I discuss



the technical aspects of the project.

*Figure 2. A screen shot of the info windows used on <http://www.dottedlandscape.org>.*

About mid-way through the project's development, I convinced myself that a secondary interface — beyond the maps — would be useful in conveying the diversity in the body of trash documented, so for each route, I implemented a thumbnail gallery view where each item is seen in a tabular layout of small

images that, when clicked, opens up a full-sized (800 x 600 pixel) view of the image in a typical “lightbox” effect, where the photo hovers over the dimmed page, thereby making it easier for the user to browse photos. The lightbox effect is a common experience on the Web and has been for a few years. Its use is well-founded in the psychological theory of “flow” made popular by Hungarian psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi who says that people are best served when they are allowed to fully immerse themselves in what they are doing. [1] It’s not likely that Csikszentmihalyi envisioned people flipping through images of litter when he considered the notion of “flow”, but as a Web designer, I am always trying to find ways to keep users engaged in the content and experiences featured in my sites.

If the Dotted Landscape project was really a Web site about trash, the above description would serve as an adequate summary of the project’s more surface-level qualities, but it’s really not as simple as that. In fact, it’s actually quite complex and requires far more historical, psychological, and technical context to understand how this site about trash is really a reflection of a single person’s experiences as a resident, cyclist, educator, and storyteller in Oregon’s second most populous county. [2]

## **What Dotted Landscape is to me**

Dotted Landscape is the confluence of three landscapes—three distinct realities flowing through my life, with their headwaters originating in 2007. As I consider them, these realities are somewhat amorphous and ill-defined in their forms as their offshoots tend to cross and intertwine along certain topics. For the sake of organizing the following segments of this document, I will categorize them as the “professional,” “personal,” and “technical” streams of consciousness that came together in the planning and development of this project. The term “personal” here refers to aspects in my life that came into focus, or took on a certain clarity, as a natural result of internal and external changes I experienced in the time leading up to and throughout my work on Dotted Landscape. “Professional” refers to my full-time employment as an associate professor of media arts with specialization in digital media design and development — something I have done since 1999 and have enjoyed immensely despite the challenges inherent in teaching such transient and constantly evolving subject matter. Finally, the “technical” nature of my pursuits here might be seen as the bridge that connects the other two areas — the thread that connects my personal experiences to my professional undertakings. As Douglas Rushkoff wrote in his book of commandments for the digital age, *Program or be Programmed*, When human beings acquired language, we learned not just how to listen but how to speak. When we gained literacy, we learned not just how to

read but how to write. And as we move into an increasingly digital reality, we must learn not just how to use programs but how to make them. [3]

This philosophy resonates in my life and in my teaching; for I believe that to become truly engaged as citizens in this digital world, an ongoing study and comprehension of digital technologies and their application to our lives is a fundamental skill. I appreciate and understand the importance of furthering my own fluency with modern web development tools that I see percolating throughout the Internet and using them in my personal life and in the curricula that I deliver to my undergraduate students in the media arts.

## **Conclusions: The road ahead**

I envisioned Dotted Landscape as a platform for me to engage my local community in a discussion about our relationship to the place we live and its trash. At this point, that platform is poised and ready to start this conversation. My first step at working with the community came in May of 2012. At this time, I made contact with two different schools in Washington County, Fernhill Elementary in Cornelius and the Forest Grove Community School. In both cases, I was allowed to come meet with students to talk about my project and gather their thoughts about litter in their world.

At Fernhill, I visited the kindergarten class of Mrs. Craiglow-Cordes. There was a wonderful moment as I was telling the students about how much I loved the area where we all lived and so I did a project that reflected my feelings about Washington County. I asked them what they thought my project was about. One by one, students called out things like “the trees”, “the mountains”, and “the wildlife”. I replied, “Those are great things to feature in a project. But I decided to do a project on... (pause) litter!” My statement was met by a unanimous “eeww” from the class. I proceeded to hand them printed photos of the garbage I had encountered on my rides and asked them to create stories about how that garbage came to be there. In their stories, I found a common theme: that garbage appears in our environment by mistake. It is as if these young minds can’t quite fathom the idea that people toss things out on the road intentionally. Student after student told me about candy wrappers blown out of open car windows on blustery days, and children’s toys falling out of their hands during a fall from their bike or scooter.

The experience was much the same with Ms. Reuter’s first grade class at Forest Grove’s Community School. I met with this class on a sunny day in the school’s community garden on Main Street. Students at this school routinely hold class in this garden where they plant flowers and vegetables, and learn about environmental stewardship. I spent an hour here video recording students as they talked to me about why there’s litter all around us and how it got

there. These students were also reluctant to believe that people leave trash on the sidewalks and roads on purpose, but a few students hinted at the fact that there might be less litter if there were more garbage cans everywhere, therefore making it easier for people to dispose of their unwanted items. As we all left the garden that day, I was happy to witness numerous students stopping to pick up litter on their walk back to the school.

My third step in talking to the community was an interview with Dr. Alyson Burns-Glover in Pacific University's psychology department. Unlike the students, Dr. Burns-Glover relayed to me the psychology behind why people litter, which is related to the idea that it is perceived to be a victimless crime with little or no consequences to the perpetrator. Dr. Burns-Glover went on to talk about how the rural areas of the county are commuter routes to a population that drives to and from urban areas for work and, as such, there is no ownership of the environment by those who pass through it rather than call it their home.

In the future, I hope to connect with members of the local art and science community to get their interpretations of what our garbage says about us and what it means to our environment. I will then create small vignettes of these experiences and interviews and begin the process of adding these community "stories" to the Dotted Landscape site. Once that is underway, I will share the site with as many people and groups as I can to encourage participation in this online experimental narrative.

Looking back on the whole process and all that has gone into it, I extract a lot of pride in what I have accomplished and look forward to the next steps in the project and those that will follow it. I am grateful for the opportunity to create something that has such a personal connection to my life and the place that I call home. I am especially thankful for the support given to me by Pacific University, the Berglund Center for Internet Studies, my student research assistant, Austin Prohl, and my incredible wife, Jennifer Hardacker.

## Notes

[1] Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2004). Flow, the secret to happiness. *TED2004*. Lecture conducted in Monterey, CA. [Web Video]. Retrieved from: [http://www.ted.com/talks/mihaly\\_csikszentmihalyi\\_on\\_flow.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/mihaly_csikszentmihalyi_on_flow.html)

[2] List of Counties in Oregon. (n.d.). In *Wikipedia*. Retrieved from: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_counties\\_in\\_Oregon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_counties_in_Oregon)

[3] Rushkoff, Douglas (2010). *Program or be Programmed: Ten Commandments for a Digital Age*. New York, New York. OR Books.