

Dan Anderson interviewed by Erin Anderson

Part 1

Erin Anderson

How would you say your webtext was innovative in the moment it was produced?

Dan Anderson

There were some technical things that were innovative in that they were not the typical web composing mode. So I used a lot of JQuery things that would float windows above a single screen and the idea was to get beyond links that replaced one page with another page and have everything sort of be, um, layered, in some ways, where, you know, materials would just replace themselves in the same screen, um, with floating kind of modal windows. So it took a fair amount of tweaking with some scripts and installing some JQuery libraries and stuff to make that happen. I don't think it was crazy technical, but it did do a nice job of getting rid of the typical complaint of either like a linear text that goes published online in some ways, or, I don't know, just the link tracing where you follow stuff and follow stuff and kind of lose track of where you were. So the design had some of that going on.

Erin Anderson

So was this the first time you had done this kind of work?

Dan Anderson

Um, no, I did something a little bit similar in a previous *Kairos* text called "I'm a Map" and that one was a different script and a different kind of model of loading. But, um, yeah, so it was the second time I tried something like that.

Erin Anderson

And how do you think your webtext has influenced the kind of work being done in the field?

Dan Anderson

Uh huh, I don't know, I mean, it's a little bit hard--it seems like you almost need to be an outsider to make that kind of comment. But I would hope that it, um, has encouraged some people to try alternative modes a little bit. It's a very different genre of scholarship. It has a lot of memoir in there, and it has a lot of kind of poetry and performance art to it, even though it still has a lot of scholarship, too. So I don't know. I mean, I think people have always been willing to experiment and try different things but I would hope that others might be encouraged by the fact that you could, that it could be published, um, and, you know, people might watch it and even though it's not your typical academic genre in some ways. So I would hope it would influence things in that way. And then the other big influence I hope that it would have would be this notion of the screen as a kind of canvas or composition space. So, it's not just this particular webtext but I think that's something I'm really, um, I'm starting to see a lot of people doing that, and I had a colleague who

mentioned to me yesterday, um, hearing about a movie that was just made with someone screencasting Facebook, and um, so, they created a full-length feature but it was all generated through the screen as a camera or as kind of the composing space. So, you know, I don't think everybody's going to start doing that, but I do feel like there is, um, some people are doing that and it's happening more often and it opens just some new possibilities for what you could, what you call a camera or what you can do with what's on your laptop, really.

Erin Anderson

So can you tell me a little bit about how you came to be doing this kind of work?

Dan Anderson

Yeah, it goes back a long ways, to, um, about 2003 when I was working on some textbook supplements, actually, and the screen recording was much more rudimentary. And I may just not have known what I was doing but the way that it was set up was that you had to kind of capture everything in one shot, and then there was also a thing where you could add voiceover but you had to kind of get that all in one shot, too. So it got me into this habit of recording something and then it wouldn't quite work out so I'd have to throw it away and record it again and record it again. And these were just basic tutorials--I was making these things like "How do you insert an image in Microsoft Word". And you go to the Insert menu and really just kind of what people normally use these screen capture things for. And I had to make a whole bunch of these for this textbook project so I just spent hours and hours performing on the screen to try to get it right and get it recorded. And so I built up that kind of approach or that habit of doing that. And then it lay dormant for awhile, and then I kind of brought it back when I was interested in doing something about the--and this was this earlier *Kairos* text--I was doing the Mac and the PC commercials, "I'm a Mac, I'm a PC" commercials, and I really wanted to just rip those videos so the easy way was to just turn on the screen camera again and I kind of got back into the idea that, um, ripping these things and recording them could be a compositional move. And then I made that project and started to just really push on it and experiment with more and more of that.

Erin Anderson

That's really interesting! So it sounds like it was almost a kind of accidental discovery.

Dan Anderson

Yeah—you never know where stuff comes from originates. It goes back a long ways. Another thing that is, um, I don't know, this is a very far back connection, but the idea of, um, just really learning to use your computer. I did that in kind of a competitive environment when I was working in the computer lab at UT Austin. And people would be sort of like, "oh no, you do command-x" or, that you know, people would always be trying to--in a very helpful, collaborative way--like, one-up each other on "here's how you do this, here's how you do that." So I got into this idea about, you know, how can you drive this machine in a very, you know, efficient or

elaborate way. What can you do with this piece of technology that you don't think of normally.

Erin Anderson

I was really interested in the way you used all of the different stages and versions of your work as part of the final webtext. Can you talk a little more about the relationship between process and product in your approach?

Dan Anderson

Yeah—yeah, so the recordings when you make these screencasts, you never really know if you're gonna mess up in the middle or it's gonna be the perfect take. So a lot of times what you do is you just record everything in case it turns out to be, like, the great take, you don't want to, like, be practicing and not have the camera turned on. So I would record a lot of these. And the other thing that happened when I was composing it was the text itself organically developed a little bit. So you might think, "oh, I'm going to go in here and open this window and then I'm gonna type this thing." But accidentally you clicked on the wrong window and it brought up an image, and then you think "oh, that's kind of interesting, maybe I could weave that in there." So every time you would do one of these performances it might generate a new path that the text might go down. So I always wanted to kind of be capturing them and then going back, and like iteratively building one on another. And then after awhile I just realized, "ok, I have all of these materials in here," and essentially what they are doing is kind of capturing the composing process because it is so iterative. And then I got to this notion of it being more of an archival project in some ways, you know, or a curatorial project, and then eventually it got ridiculous. So I'm sure--you may have looked at some of it. And Madeleine Sorapure looked at it a lot when she was helping me edit the text. But nobody wants to go back and look at, like, take #8 of piece # 7. You know, there's so much stuff and a lot of it is still on the hard drive that, you know, I decided, "no, no one needs to see that." And a lot of it ends up in the trash can or what have you as well. So I'm curious about, you know, that idea of capturing your activity and even the stuff that's usually ephemeral, what happens when you actually save it and go back and look at it.

Erin Anderson:

I've seen you perform your screencast work live before, and I'm curious to hear more about how you work with rehearsed materials vs. letting things unfold in the moment. Would you say the sense of "liveness" is important to your work?

Dan Anderson

Um, yeah, I think so. I think I've changed the way I approach things. I used to imagine that there would be a lot of kind of impromptu value that would come. So, you know, like extemporaneous typing: "I'm gonna bring up a window and then I'll just riff on this idea of, I don't know, layers and screens of what have you." And a lot of times when you're staging this and like building it up, your brain just generates a really interesting phrase and you say "oh, wow, that phrase was great." But then there's really a lot of garbage around it, um. So I think my composing shifted a little

bit in terms of, I don't rely on things to just kind of come out of nowhere in these impromptu typing sessions. I still try to do that sometimes, but I think the nuggets that come out are surrounded sometimes by a lot of fluff that isn't really all that valuable. Although sometimes you never know, you get in kind of a flow and there's some really interesting things that come up. So now I kind of have a mixed approach. And even in that text there's a mixed approach of, you know, working on paper and sketching out ideas and then doing a screen recording and then maybe typing something that just kind of emerges and then, um, going back and combining those and creating a script that you could go back. And you know, eventually I got to the point where I was faking the impromptu stuff by, you know, typing up a script and recording it and then putting in ear buds and having it play so I could, you know, pretend to be typing it live. And then, you know, in my--what I do lately is more or less memorize what I want to type and then I'll sit there and type and perform stuff. So I think I've evolved a little bit in terms of, um, just the preparation and staging and the process of how I imagine making a text like that in some ways.

Erin Anderson

Performance is obviously really central to your method. Could you tell me more about how you understand the role of performance in your work?

Dan Anderson

Yeah, yeah, and I think there's two pieces to the performance. There's the kind of, um, acting on screen or on stage--you know, what we normally think of as a kind of theatrical sense of performance. But I also have in mind the performativity that is linked up with theories of materialism and the idea that there's objects and events, or nouns and verbs. And so there's kind of a philosophical underpinning there of what it means to really value emergence and performance in texts themselves. And typically it's almost impossible to see that. So you have a finished text and there was all of this process that happened beforehand, but that gets sort of lost. So the idea is the capturing in some ways pushes the performative or the process piece a little bit forward, and complements then the product. You know, there's the artifact eventually, but that artifact has much more of the kind of activity built into it in some ways. And that all is just my, um, my philosophical kind of fidgeting with notions of space and time, and how, you know, you can never just have objects or just have material stuff, it's always going to move forward in time and become process again in this sort of mobius back and forth between, um, products and processes and all of that. So that's kind of, um, why I really value the kind of performative angle. But then the other piece is the, um, the more theatrical or the idea of being in the moment and it's linked up with creativity, actually. I mean, one of the reasons why I enjoy making these is you kind of do get sucked into it and you lose track of time. And, you know, you might have tried this eighteen times and it's frustrating and challenging, but you keep going and you try it the nineteenth time and you're just in the moment making, is kind of an active process that you get involved in. And, um, and that's not because it's multimedia or what have you. I think the same thing can happen if you're making poems on paper or making

candles or whatever. There's a way in which you get just caught into the creativity of making what you're trying to make. And so that--I like that a lot, too.

Part 2

Erin Anderson:

Watching you do your performances, I think it's really clear how much you enjoy what you're doing and how much of the work is about curiosity and discovery.

Dan Anderson

Absolutely, yeah--I mean, the first thing that, um, I don't know, I've experienced this in a lot of moments--and people do, I mean, you're always experiencing these sort of just wonderful moments where you're feeling engaged and invigorated by something. But some of my earliest ones were writing HTML code when the web was brand new. And what was fascinating was the idea of the shift between the source page where you'd be writing this code and then you'd display it in the browser. And there'd be this sort of, like, translation between those two states, and you could just really get sucked into writing this code. Or, you know, programming any other kind of coding language--you can have the exact same phenomenon take place. So, I think it's mostly a matter of being motivated by the project and getting lost in it, in some ways. And I completely try to make this happen in other contexts. So in teaching, I do things like have a portfolio system so that when students are working on a project there's no grade involved whatsoever. So the motivation becomes more intrinsic, and they're much more likely to just be focused on what they're making. And I also try to do things like give them a comfortable balance between unfamiliarity and, um, I don't know, just a sense that they can accomplish the task. So if I'm asking them to make a video and it's a brand new experience, sometimes I'll say "make a character analysis video" because you know what that is, it's not going to trip you up that much, but you're also going to go into this weird space of doing your character analysis through the screen. And then they're able to kind of get lost into that same process hopefully. So then they lose track of time, too, and kind of get engaged in the project instead of thinking about school and that kind of stuff.

Erin Anderson

In terms of the content of the "Watch the Bubble" video, there is an attempt to bring your reflections on the field into conversation with your personal experience, your biography. Could you talk a little more about the initial motivation behind the project?

Dan Anderson

Yeah, um, a lot of it is kind of an homage to some teachers I've had that really meant a lot to me. So, and some of it I think had to do with, um, these calls for manifestos that come out every four or five years, and I kind of wanted to capture some of the things that I really find most valuable about computers and writing. And, you know,

with the growth of digital humanities now, and the way that, you know, every five or six years people are sort of rediscovering things like, "oh, you can use computers and isn't it creative"--I kind of wanted to, um, capture the tenets of the computers and writing community that really mattered, the ideas of, like, experimentation or, you know, people will help you, you can make mistakes, you don't have to know everything--all of these sorts of things that really make it wonderful to work in this kind of environment. So just a way of maybe coming up with a list of those and codifying them in some ways--driven in part by external circumstances, where, you know, sometimes a little bit of frustration as people rediscover things that you've been doing for a long time, and wanting to just sort of recover that history, and, you know, just make it available in some ways. But a lot of it is personal, too--I just really wanted to celebrate some of the experiences I've had, too.

Erin Anderson

Your work seems to be in line with a larger trend toward trying to merge creative and critical work and rethinking the forms of knowledge production. Could you talk about what you're trying to do in terms of the larger intellectual project?

Dan Anderson

Yes, um, I do really like this alt scholarship, um, path that I've kind of been going down for awhile. And so I think there's two pieces, um--I have two hopes for what might be generated from this. And one has to do with just opening up our understanding of what can be scholarship. And a lot of this I think, even in, you know, traditional literary theory or theoretical areas, people are saying "why does scholarship have to be so combative, why do we always have to be, you know, chopping each other down, is there not a way in which we can have an affirmative kind of scholarship or a human respectful kind of scholarship?" So that's one of the things that I would hope, is, you know, a piece that's celebrating and it's not, you know, making counter-arguments and saying "yes, but, but, but," that kind of stuff. So there's one thing there I would hope that it would just create more energy or more desire for that, or maybe just serve as an example of what you can do that isn't the typical academic gnashing of teeth, or what have you. So I think that's one of my main aims. But the other one that's actually related in some ways is, I feel that it's conceivable that some of that behavior is linked to the essay form or that academic article form, where there's the literature review and then you, you know, you slice it up, and then you put in an alternative thing. And so I worry that the forms that we use, particularly the ones that have kind of a print-centric history, might be complicit in these behaviors that I just think it's worth pushing against a little bit. So that's where this one really is offering, I think, an example of saying "ok, you can also challenge things or you can go in a different way, but let's not do it in prose." Or, I mean, there's prose in there, there's plenty of language, but let's use multimedia, just in case there's something to be had there that's affirmative, that isn't available to us when we're just looking at words on a page. So that's the other area I think--it's multimedia and it's alternative scholarship expressed through an alternative form, through multimedia rather than through talking about multimedia or alternative scholarship in print form. And I think, you know, if people could take one thing away

it would be, well, this is actually using the medium or the form itself to articulate and enact the argument or the claims or, I don't know, just the message that it's trying to make rather than sort of doing that from a distance in some other non-native form.

Erin Anderson:

Tell me about some of the people who have influenced your work.

Dan Anderson

Yeah, um, you know in the Computers and Writing area some of the people I mention in that video were good influences on me. And then, you know, Anne Wysocki and others who've been doing multimedia scholarship--the whole *Kairos* ecosystem and journal, I think, has been a huge inspiration to me. It's been, *Kairos* has been huge for my scholarship, and every four or five years I feel like there's a new, kind of technical edge that is welcomed and creates a space for scholars to practice in new modes that emerges in that journal. So, um, so I think that's all been really valuable to me, those influences. And then, you know, lately a lot of my colleagues are--I have, these videos I've been making lately, I've been working with [inaudible] on my campus, and we have this thing where we would trade these videos. So you know, instead of like sending each other an email message we would, like, "oh, let's make up a video." Well, we'll like send screencasts back and forth. We did that for awhile and it really kind of got me even further down the path of thinking about, you know, can you really use an alternative mode, and what comes from it.

Part 3

Erin Anderson

So it seems like you've been developing this kind of work for a while. Do you remember when you made your first screencast performance?

Dan Anderson

2011, 2012-ish. 2011 probably, yeah.

Erin Anderson

So, looking back at your webtext a couple of years on, is there anything that you might do differently?

Dan Anderson

I think I could make the video much better now. You know, I'm not, um—I've moved into a different thing of every one of the videos I make now I want to be able to remake it as many times as possible. So that turns into more of a performance piece that can be re-performed over and over again. And in the moment when I was making that video, I did it a bunch of times and a bunch of times and got a good capture of it. But I don't think I've created the, um, something that can be redone as

much over and over. So I mean, I'd like to re-do that video at some point in a way that's more, um, I don't know, just adaptable and performance-like. So it feels a little bit canned in some ways. But maybe that's just—it's good to get these things closed up and put them away sometimes, too. But now, I don't know, I mean, I think one of the things that—it's an interesting video in that it kind of has a, like a back door and a front door that lead backwards and forwards in time. So the "Watch the Bubble" piece was generated in some ways out of this earlier piece called "I'm a Map". And then at the very end I made this video called "Truing" which ended up being—I kind of snuck it in to the "Watch the Bubble" piece right at the last minute before Madeleine [Sorapure] said don't put any more material in here. Because I kept—it would never stop, that was one of the interesting things about this video as well. I would always say "it's not quite ready, I'm still capturing something about the process, I'm going back through this archive of all this junk, and rather than put it in there I want to film something in this archive." And you just kind of had to, just eventually, just like turn off the computer because you could just keep building it forever. But the last thing that kind of made it over the transom was this piece that is actually probably my favorite piece that I perform quite a bit, and kind of pushed me to where I am now, more or less, which is, um, all of these things can be done over and over and over again in the moment in a performative way rather than them being artifacts that just get finished in 2012 and then you move away from them.

Erin Anderson

About how many of these screencast performances have you done?

Dan Anderson

You know, I'm not sure. Published ones—you know, I started with the "I'm a Map" video in *Kairos* and then I did the "Watch the Bubble" one. And I did one with students, which is this one called "Casting Learning," and so those three are kind of of a piece that I did in about a two-and-a-half or three year period. And then the rest I've mostly just put on Vimeo or YouTube. And so I'll make one and it either does become kind of a closed deal that I just post online somewhere, or it just becomes one in my kind of repertoire that I'll do when I'm at a conference or, you know, at a poetry reading. I've started doing these at poetry readings and stuff, too, and just—so I now just have like a, I don't know, a set that can pull from and do some of these. And I like doing that.

Erin Anderson

What kinds of reactions do you get from audiences who are encountering this kind of work for the first time?

Dan Anderson

Yeah, the responses are always a little bit, um—I think audiences are unsure what to make of the pieces actually. I think a lot times they'll enjoy the affective experience of them, um, and in the poetry readings I think that works better sometimes, as opposed to in the academic conference. The challenge in the academic conference is, um—and this is a challenge related to these pieces and what you might call "alt

scholarship"—is, so how do you calibrate the sort of performance, poetic, interesting imagery, music, flow, all of that with the intellectual content of scholarship? And I think to really make the scholarship work you kind of need to spend more time with these. So a lot of times there's some scholarship that's happening in the lower corner and you might miss it if you're just sitting there in the moment. But if you were to go back and watch the video and then re-watch it, then you might get that scholarly kernel. So I think the affective, "Whoa, that was kind of interesting, or I don't know what that was" comes across pretty well, and then the next layer down of, ok, "what does that mean about, you know, digital epistemologies, I think there was something in there but I'm not sure." That doesn't come through nearly as readily, I think, on an initial reading. But I think that's, um—we have the same tendencies if you are reading a really difficult scholarly article in print, you go back and you reread it, and you reread it, and you just spend time with it for awhile and then you kind of get it a little bit.

Erin Anderson

Curation and arrangement of existing content is obviously really central to your webtext. Could you talk more about how you see the role of curation in your work—and maybe any thoughts on the degradation of digital texts?

Dan Anderson

Hmm—uh, I don't know. I think curation is a wonderful concept. I love the concept of curation because it's got not only the sense of, like, capturing and saving things but also, um, you know, applying your own interpretation or working with them to make them understandable and usable by others. So I almost feel like a text like "Watch the Bubble" is a curatorial text as much as anything. There is, you know, kind of a main video but there's all these other pieces, and, you know, the umbrella text that's published in *Kairos* in many ways is really a curation of these pieces that captured the process of the composing of that one video at any given time. So I think that's really valuable, and, I mean, I like it in terms of the way that it fits in with notions of alt-scholarship, too, because it's sort of just trying to capture and make sense of stuff rather than win an argument or, you know—it might be ok to just say "something interesting happened, um, let's see what we can make of it." And so I really like that impulse. I think it can be a little bit messy if it gets caught up with, you know, notions of archives and, you know—there's a lot of things that curation can be, all really interesting. And this one in particular is a different kind of curation in that it's linked to a writing process or it's kind of about the composing process, a multimedia composing process.

Erin Anderson

So what's next? Where are you going from here?

Dan Anderson

Well, I'm working on more videos like the ones that I've made and I'm trying to collect about forty of them and call it a book, you know. So the idea is to see if there's a way that you can get a critical mass of these. And I'm trying to balance the amount

of writing around the videos that needs to happen for it to sort of qualify as a book and to actually count as an academic—you know, to resonate with academics as a book of scholarship. So that's where I'm going with these kinds of projects. The other things I'm doing are like a completely different vein. So I'm doing platform development for, um, you know, academics, trying to do that, and digital humanities things. I'm also trying to do a lot of these things in my classes. So I just finished an e-poetry unit in one of my classes, and I—usually I think people see this in a negative light, when you try to clone yourself as a scholar, or what have you, and make your students do exactly what you do. That's really frowned upon. But I kind of felt good about it, because I asked them to, you know, make these wacky screen poems and, you know, do these performances. And they really liked it, and they made some very interesting things. So I'm, you know, learning how to teach this, I think, is one of the things I'm working on now—kind of figuring out if I can come up with really good models for making students feel comfortable doing this kind of work and having them take something away from it that is intellectually kind of rich for them.

Erin Anderson

Is there anything else you'd like to add? Anything we haven't addressed?

Dan Anderson

Yeah. Hmm, no, I'm just really grateful to *Kairos* for, you know, making space for this kind of work, I think. And I think, um, you know, one of the things that is, it's really valuable for these kinds of stamps of approval or authorization to be applied to work that doesn't fit in the kind of normal boxes. So I mean, I've done a little bit of this with a text like this by—um, people are going to wonder what this is so I'm just going to call it scholarship, and then maybe it'll be scholarship by applying that label. And I think *Kairos* is really valuable for being able to authorize that in some ways. And so, that's, it's really to be celebrated. And that's, you know, that's the underlying kind of content piece about how this is about the computers and writing community which is comfortable with that. And so I guess if there is a take-away it is the idea that you can try something different, put a lot of energy into it—it won't be, like, easy, it's still going to be rigorous or challenging, there's a lot to it, but it doesn't have to look like what everything looks like before, and it can be driven by just playing with the technologies and seeing what you can come up with. And there's a space for that, and it's really valuable. Because we already know how to do the other stuff, you know, and it's good to have really traditional things, it's fine, but we've got that figured out already, in some ways. So these new spaces are really valuable.