

The New York Times

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JULY 3, 2007, 8:26 PM

Tracking Michael Jackson's Glove Online

By [DAVID F. GALLAGHER](#)

The fruits of an unusual research project were unveiled today, one involving Michael Jackson and thousands of Internet-connected strangers.

The [White Glove Tracking](#) project was created by Evan Roth and Ben Engebret, with the backing of the art-and-technology groups [Rhizome](#) and [Eyebeam](#). Web-surfing volunteers were invited to view frames of Michael Jackson's legendary performance of "Billie Jean" on a [1983 television special](#) and pinpoint the location of Mr. Jackson's white glove.

The glove trackers tackled the job just for fun, finishing the job in 72 hours back in May thanks to a surge of traffic from Digg and other sites. The data they produced is now available online and has already been put to [some highly creative uses](#). My favorite is [this clip by Zach Lieberman](#), in which the "Billie Jean" video has been automatically cropped to focus obsessively on the glove. The result is something like watching "The Glove, Live on Stage, Wearing Michael Jackson." (Frames with no glove, like those at the beginning, are black.)

Isn't glove-tracking something a computer program could do? Sure, but writing software is time-consuming and expensive, and humans are generally better at this sort of visual task than computers. If you get enough of them to help out, you can get through 10,060 frames of "Billie Jean" in no time. Amazon's [Mechanical Turk](#) service operates along these lines, paying people a few cents to do tasks that have been broken down into small chunks. (The approach falls into the broader realm of [crowdsourcing](#).)

The glove project's creators acknowledge that their chosen subject matter was not all that weighty. But because the software they wrote to allow people to glove-track is open source, it can be freely downloaded and put to work toward more noble ends. Of course, the absurdity of this project was part of its appeal. At least there's one place where the King of Pop can still draw a crowd.

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