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# Tactics of insouciance: On Wool, IT and Anarchy

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*"Much of what is exciting about DIY is not just what we do, but how we do it: the subversiveness of the projects (...) or that empowering moment when you realize that this thing is so much simpler to make than you ever expected." [6, p.7]*

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## Abstract

Analysing two crafty workshops at IT conferences, I argue that these spaces are important 'playgrounds' for research in new technologies. Through perspectives of anarchism (in particular the concept of "temporary autonomous zone") and knitting (in particular as feminist critique), I analyse the research spaces in the workshops. As both materials and approach deviate from 'normal' practice, the workshops become temporary autonomous zones in which alternate realities can be formulated through creative actions that use carefree insouciance as a deliberate tactics.

## Author Keywords

anarchy, crafts, design, DIY, workshops

## ACM Classification Keywords

Human-centered computing → HCI theory, concepts and models; Interaction design process and methods;

## Introduction

*"The 'nomadic war machine' conquers without being noticed and moves on before the map can be adjusted."* Hakim Bey [3]

At CHI09, I participated in a workshop on do-it-yourself as a design strategy. My 'ticket' was two crocheted hats, five balls of cotton yarn, three needles and a bag



Figure 1: Participants at the workshop DIY4CHI 'circuit bend' a used toy keyboard, in order to explore the sounds it is capable of producing. Photo: Lone Koefoed Hansen



Figure 2: The two self-crafted 'teleport hats' that I brought to the workshop DIY4CHI. See also [12] Photo: Lone Koefoed Hansen

of glass beads because I was one of 40 participants about to make new objects out of e.g. yarn and defunct toys (see figure 1).

Exploring how we might understand this type of event where both materials and methods are unusual for 'serious' conferences like CHI, I analyse this way of doing IT research from two perspectives. First, knitting and other soft crafts are an act of third-wave feminism closely tied to a broader critique of (capitalist) society. Second, the term "temporary autonomous zone" (TAZ) describes contemporary anarchism. Combining the two perspectives I argue that the workshops perform an alternative research space; partly because materials and approach deviates from 'normal' practice and partly because the workshops constitute a zone in which alternate realities can be formulated through creative actions that use insouciance as a deliberate tactics.

### Handcrafting imaginary computers

The purpose of a workshop is usually that participants spend a day immersed in discussions on a topic or technology. DIY4CHI was different because we met in order to experiment with the odd materials we brought. DIY, e.g. sewing, knitting, welding, bike repairs and hacking/altering of existing objects, also expresses a resistance towards mass-production and single-purpose objects, embracing "anti-consumerism, rebelliousness, and creativity". [21, p. 296].

Applying for the workshop required a homemade DIY object as well as an online step-by-step instruction enabling others to reproduce, modify or be inspired. I had made two crocheted hats that I claimed to be teleport hats, referencing the tv-series Star Trek (see figure 2). In my concept every hat was a portal in a

two-node system: a hat would automatically 'beam' the wearer to the other hat, enabling dislocated couples to travel easily. Using humour the hats embody a belief that technology will be able to help us be connected despite separation (see also [13]). A decidedly silly project, the hats were well received at the workshop, which was incredibly fun to participate in.

At DIS10 I continued the teleport project in a, still silly, way: it would call someone on Skype. The purpose of the *Handcrafting Textile Mice* workshop was to make input device prototypes out of soft materials (see [20]). The room was packed with sewing machines, balls of yarn, primitive knitting machines, soldering irons, computers and electronics components for us to utilise (figure 3, 4). Possessing too few competences in programming, I never got the hat to Skype but I did make it move the cursor. Some participants knew a lot about fabrics, yarns and sewing but very little about electronics and programming and vice versa. Only the workshop organiser knew both. Obviously, soft computing is also a serious research field but in this paper, I focus on how the strategy of these workshops is to be an alternative space for IT research and on how they have an open, insouciant and playful approach to the envisioning of IT.

The workshops serve as a cultural marker for a specific approach to research. 'Soft' computing is well-known, but recycling, upcycling and hacking are far from mainstream approaches to investigating how computers can look, act and feel. Similarly, it is not everyday practice that research is staged as decidedly silly both in looks and purpose. Few researchers would sign up for an event that explicitly challenges you to think of research as evoking smiles and unexpected moments

### Quotes from Bey [3] [4]

#### TAZ:

*"a guerilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to re-form elsewhere/elsewhen, before the State can crush it."* [3]

#### Media:

*"must not possess us, nor must they stand between, mediate, or separate us from our animal/animate selves. We want to control our media, not be Controlled by them (...) therefore, as artists & "cultural workers" who have no intention of giving up activity in our chosen media, we nevertheless demand of ourselves an extreme awareness."* [4]

WHILE also being research relevant. And it is precisely the 'smiling' and self-ironic aspect that I will expand on in the following where it is my goal to outline a (slightly speculative) framework for understanding these workshops.

#### TAZ

As the name suggests, a Temporary Autonomous Zone is a non-permanent and independent territory. The term was coined in [3] by Hakim Bey, presenting a theory of and for anarchism and describing how the anarchist evades absorption by those systems and structures that he is in opposition to. TAZ should be seen as a continuation of French philosopher Michel de Certeau's terms *strategy* and *tactics*, that describe how every system devise strategies for its construction and how those who live in the system use tactics in order to maneuver the strategies [8]. The purpose of any given tactics is to circumvent the structures of the system enabling 'survival' of the individual. A central point is that even if a system can attempt to predict and work against potential tactics by including them in the strategy, it will always be impossible for a system to predict and often even detect tactics when they appear.

Bey thus describes two different but interwoven and interdependent perspectives: strategies (or planning or commanding) only makes sense an opposition is present; even when this opposition is not 'evil spirited' but is just an expression of practical or everyday appropriation of a strategy or masterplan. Conversely, the idea of the everyday dispositions and tactics of an individual only makes sense if understood as an interplay with a masterplan or mainstream, regardless of whether or not this main interpretation is deliberate. Bey repeatedly stresses that TAZ should primarily be

understood as a metaphor: "an essay, a suggestion, almost a poetic fancy." [3]. His agenda is thus not to describe or analyse specific phenomena, neither is it possible to use his text as a check-list for when something is, or is not, anarchistic. Inspired by the nomadic war-machine of Deleuze and Guattari [9], TAZ describes the systemic functions of resistance and mainstream and how dominant understandings of society, art, life etc can always be challenged in quick bursts of resistance working in those inconsistencies that any system will always have; cracks that are open for exploitation by temporary territories that will stay until the system detects, map, assimilate and/or repair. At this moment, Bey writes, the anarchist must quickly move on; the dynamic TAZ must dissolve before it is assimilated into the machine of the system.

Central to the TAZ is thus that it emerges where the system does not see cracks. In addition, it is important that the anarchist (or the zone, depending on who we ascribe the role of actor) is concerned with those issues that hold a system together: "The strike is made at structures of control, essentially at ideas," [3]. Further, Bey asserts that the anarchist method is to work creatively when seeking to bypass the structures (the opposite of humouring the system's strategy, cf de Certeau). That creativity is key is clear in "Immediatism", a manifest celebrating the here-and-now as a creative basis for development [4]. Clearly inspired by McLuhan's "(an)aesthetics" [22], Bey asserts that developing counter-measures to the influence of technology is crucial as technology's mediation is the reason why humans have pulled away from any immediate sensing of the world. Everything is mediated, nothing is 'real'. However, this doesn't mean that media should be wiped off the Earth (Bey and his

then readers were part of the media industry). It does mean, though, that it is important to *also* work against the dominant understandings of technologies and the roles they play in our lives (see quote on previous page).

Read as a pair, Bey's two texts describe how a system's structures are discursively closing, and as soon as a creative here-and-now becomes permanent, it is assimilated into the system. This assimilation makes creative work impossible because it no longer takes place in the cracks and fissures but instead from within the system itself. As a consequence, the anarchist (and thereby also the TAZ) must operate in a state of constant flux so as not to become trapped by the structure that it seeks to manipulate. And one of the best ways of keeping flux is to insist on out-of-the-box thinking. It must be tactical not strategic cf de Certeau. One way of thinking or staging such tactics is to displace a task from 'serious' to playful. In the two workshops, one might say that insouciance is used as a tactics in order to expose and produce cracks.

### **Challenging visions of the future**

In the usual discourse of IT-research, the approach to the not (yet) good (enough) prototypes and concepts is that once technology becomes e.g. faster, more stable or smaller, the shortcomings will disappear. However, there seems to be a growing appreciation of the flaws in that argument; an appreciation that shortcomings could be a permanent condition that we will never be able to escape through designing better products, technologies or structures. As [2] argues, technology *is* "messy" and instead of excusing this fact, we need to use this in a constructive and pro-active way by studying that which has already been designed on the

terms that happen to be present. The remarks by Bell and Dourish unambiguously highlight a dominant expectation to technologies: that they *can* be(come) perfect and that they will necessarily continue in the same tradition of what is already here.

Following this, the workshops stage a temporary break from dominant expectations and discourses, allowing for explorations that are best described as playful, carefree or insouciant. They are temporary zones that specifically engage with the cracks and fissures that emerge once you stop excusing technology for being imperfect; zones where visions are challenged without being dismissed. Furthermore, it seems that this partly happens by using other materials than what is normally used in IT development. The playful and insouciant partly happens as a consequence of the materials and methods used. Glass beads, yarn and knitting needles are by most people rarely, if ever, associated with computers and I have received many surprised and somewhat sceptical responses when I have talked about the workshops (this is, however, also one of the reasons why it is incredibly fun to participate).

As regards yarn crafts, knitting is not new to the revolutionary discourse, which I will look further into below. The French aristocracy was beheaded in front of a knitting audience (the French "tricoteuses" means "knitters" and originates in the French revolution. See Godineau [11]) and for the second time in 40 years, knitting is discursively constructed as a particular kind of 'weapon'.

### **Critiquing by knitting?**

"We referred to it as 'the bible'," my neighbour said when handing me her copy of "Hønsesrik" [15]

### Quotes from [15]

(all translated by myself)

Page 3:

*"Free knitting is a CALL FOR ACTION against yarn companies that refuse to give us their patterns if we don't buy their yarn!"*

*Free knitting is a BREAK WITH the usual knitting books that always insist on recommending a specific yarn company in their patterns!*

*Free knitting is a REBELLION against patterns that limit knitters instead of inciting us to use our imagination when we knit!"*

Page 8-9:

*"Let's begin by changing society while we knit a lovely sweater for ourselves and our children"*

*"Once your first knit is finished there will be no end to your courage, also in other aspects than knitting."*

(‘Hønsestrik’ translates to “hen knitting”, referring, in Danish as well as in English, to women chatting. The English translation [16] is called “Free Knitting”).

The book collected stories about a beginning knitting trend, providing a manifest for how people (men and women both) should stop knitting patterns bought in a store. As such, this simple knitting book was more than a collection of stories; it marked the beginning of a widespread knitting and sewing praxis in the 1970s. This very influential book laid out the intellectual and political backdrop of knitting and sewing in this particular paradigm, and it is explicitly stated that knitting is both a creative and a political act. The opening sentences are quoted in the left column.

Three books were published in this series (1974-80) and they are known for their very simple base patterns, many case examples and finally stories describing how people have used these basic patterns to explore their creativity through knitting. The explicit purpose was to show that knitting is both fun and creative and not least that it is a means to liberation from a society of mass-production that decides *who* the producer is and *what* is being produced. By demystifying and concretising the act of knitting a sweater, a dress, or a children's hat and by telling stories about men and women, young and old, beginners as well as advanced knitters, the message of the book is that everything begins with a free mind: Throughout the book it is frequently indicated that creative practises (here: knitting), will incite general revolution. Knitting becomes a means to end suppression of women, children, and others that need to be liberated, and it becomes a means to liberating society from mass-production. Knitting becomes a ‘weapon’. Phrases like

“the suppression of knitters” are used and it argues for demystifying experts [15, p. 47]. Knitting patterns are “paralysing” and “constructors of authority” and they create a “sense of insecurity”, making the knitter feel inadequate. The book is clearly meant to make readers realise that it is literally possible to reclaim production, in knitting as well as in society.

‘Hønsestrik’ was re-published in 2009 [17]. In this edition, almost all drawings and pictures are replaced but the words are unchanged. A mix between a relic of a lost age and a contemporary tongue-in-cheek appropriation, it is a neo-classic hipster edition. New cases replace the original case descriptions and the motifs from the 1973 edition. Where the motifs were primarily stylised horses, humans and women's liberation logos, in the new edition many of these have been replaced by for instance an Adidas logo and Super Mario. Obviously, the agenda has changed: the smile has become an ironic remark in its commenting of consumer culture. Implicitly, we understand that the father and son pictured in hand-knitted sweaters with ‘fake’ Adidas logos are probably wearing ‘real’ Adidas shoes. The pattern for this ‘fake’ logo is made with microrevolt.org, an art and activist project that also has an online pattern service: “In the Tactical Media lab [...] microRevolt created a series of ‘logoknits’ – knitted garments with the logos of sweatshop offenders.” [23]. This makes Microrevolt an implicit part of third-wave feminism where also the growth in crafts and things-with-yarn can be understood as a manifestation of a newer version of a feminist discourse, posing a broad critique of society. Microrevolt is part of the same craftivism movement as “Stitch’n’bitch” and “Happy Hooker”, two of the craft-with-yarn books in my book collection [26,27]. Both have sold millions of copies.

Written and edited by Debbie Stoller, they are more than (often quite alternative) pattern collections but also formed the basis of knitting clubs around year 2000. Neither the name *Stitch-n-bitch*, nor knitting clubs is a new phenomenon but with these books the practice of knitting got new meaning. The blossoming of clubs was understood as a humorous and self-aware rebellion against traditions and the name underscored the self-irony. It is in many ways comparable to the reprint of the *Hønsestrik* book: in both books, traditional techniques are used to comment on current political and consumerist climate. When *Stitch-n-bitch* publishes patterns of skulls and Pac Man it becomes clear that knitting is about being critical not just learning how to craft - in a very ironic way, of course. It is also clear that while there's a creative agenda in individuals showing their ability to knit (or craft), the primary agenda is to let the knitting inspire and entice you to access existing cultural icons with an eye for the hidden creative potentials in it. The knitter is challenged to appropriate the world by knitting it.

Pentney argues that the recent growth of knitting and other 'soft' crafts can be seen as a feminist praxis [24] because it partakes in a critical, reflective and often humorous dialogue with "capitalist consumption and media", one of the common traits of third-wave feminism [14]. Pentney further argues, that *stitch-n-bitch* knitting is a direct continuation of 1990s DIY aesthetics: Movements like *Riot Grrrl* started in the punk movement and one of their key expressions was to use DIY aesthetics extensively in (maga)zines and music production (see [25]). Pentney asserts that "Like the *Riot Grrrl* movement's DIY aesthetic [...] knitting discourse encourages creativity in spite of artistic skill or training, the creation of personalized, one-of-a-kind

objects" [24]. Creative practice is thus concerned with posing an alternative to uncritical accept of mainstream media. Both '*Hønsestrik*' and contemporary movements thus advocate the importance of daring to act and daring to let creativity loose without being afraid of the quality of craftsmanship. Similarly, in the DIY culture, the lack of craftsmanship and technical skills become integrated into the aesthetic expression, thus following the tradition of punk culture as well. [Spencer] While Pentney does not require the aesthetic expression of the crafted objects to look as if they were produced by an amateur with insufficient skills, it is a requirement that the crafted objects are somehow characterised by not following conventions. They need to 'stick out' when compared to the traditional understanding of crafts, either as objects (through their looks) or as process (the way they come into being).

Pentney argues that this often subversive practice is feminist for two reasons, both of which are politically biased and both of which are commentaries to gender roles. Firstly, it seeks to redefine the practices of knitting (and the practice of crafting in general) in the same way as in the free knitting movement: from being understood as something fixing women in traditional gender roles, the practice of knitting should now be understood as being linked to the empowering of women (or individuals as such, gender neutral). This because the practice of knitting enables individuals to 'make', regardless of the capital structures of the industrial complex. This transforms knitting into a social practice as well as a commentary to consumer society; sometimes this is referred to as *guerilla knitting*. 'Movements' like *Stich'n'bitch* discursively construct knitters and crocheters as people with a free choice: with regards to colour, form and material, with regards



Figure 3: Participants at the workshop “Handcrafting Textile Mice”, DIS10. Photo: Hannah Perner-Wilson.



Figure 4: At the workshop “Handcrafting Textile Mice” I receive help to make the test hat (that I just made on the sewing machine) provide input to my computer. Photo: Chat Wacharamanotham and Hannah Perner-Wilson.

to places to perform their craft: on trains and busses, in parks and livingrooms as well as with regards to the context in which crafting can take place: at meetings, public talks, concerts and when watching TV.

Secondly, the practice is *craftivism*, a contraction of *craft* and *activism* (see e.g. [7] and [18]). Often, craftivism performs explicitly political acts as when artist Hanne Gaard Grønlund crochets guns [1], as when the artist Stephanie Syjuco crochet copies of highly expensive consumer goods in “The counterfeit crochet project” [5], or as when artist Marianne Jørgensen knits a pink cover for a military tank with the explicit goal of detaching its dangerous connotations and ridicule its masculinity [19].

As regards craftivism, Julia Bryan-Wilson sees crafts as a political act. Presenting artist projects that use yarn as material (when knitting, crocheting or sewing) and that deliberately use the connotations of the materials to stress political points, she asks if there is “something inherently political in crocheting your own hat?” [5, p. 74] and answers that yes, there is. Since they are not needed in a highly industrialised society, crafts is (also) always a political act, even if not deliberately. And this political connotation is exactly what the art projects explore and perform.

By analysing examples and cases, the above texts thus have in common that they illustrate and discuss what can quite comfortably be named alternative craft practices and they convincingly argue that ‘soft crafts’ has changed status into a sort of unorganised or loosely organised small-scale protest movement with roots in a critique of society with a feminist touch. Thus, it is almost impossible not to connote the use of yarns to a

practice of scrutinising a phenomenon from a critical perspective. This seems to be the case regardless of the object; guns, handknitted sweaters and perhaps also computers. I believe that this feminist inspired, critical perspective is precisely what is (implicitly) being used as a ‘tool’ in the workshops that this paper aims to understand as a cultural phenomenon.

### Crafting a handknitted haven

Following TAZ and craftivism, I will (somewhat speculatively) claim that precisely by including yarns, defunct toys and knitting machines, it becomes possible to create the ‘haven’ that you need, if you wish to construct and discuss alternatives to the dominant understandings of present and future computing cultures. Especially if this happens at an IT conference with more than 2,000 participants, ready to present, reassure and possibly defend their understanding of how technology shapes culture and vice versa. In the descriptions of workshops like ‘DIY4CHI’ and ‘Handcrafting Textile Mice’, the critical connotations of ‘soft crafts’ are clear and are attached to the workshop purpose: When challenging you to join the workshop in order to “play at computer” with materials like fuse beads and origami paper, the organisers draw on the contemporary understanding of crafts: that homemade objects also work as a commentary to the dominance of industrial objects, which are in themselves one of the premises for IT research in which nothing would exist without large corporations and their R&D departments. In other words, by temporarily putting aside ‘the normal state of affairs’ through a coupling of yarn, textiles and IT conference participants, these workshops contribute to a reconceptualisation of technology as both product and process. The odd coupling of materials and context is what creates the

'cracks' that the TAZ is always looking for; it becomes possible to work in the unexpected fissure emerging when materials and context collide. This is especially true when workshop participants are, first, aware that they are temporarily dissolving existing conventions and are, second, able to see themselves as temporary activists making use of a sort of tactics of insouciance in order to challenge the existing discourses that participants normally engage in. They temporarily circumvent the dominant strategies at the conference.

By focusing on DIY, the amateur version of the skilled craftsman, by using primarily soft materials and by encouraging participants to work in ways they would normally never, the workshops can in principle displace prevailing conceptions of IT where objects are normally factory made and normally made of plastic and metal. Also important is that the workshops are less concerned with the end product than with the process that perhaps (and then probably only by chance) leads to a product when the day has come to an end.

These workshops are not about keeping control, and they are not about figuring out how to make a design method. Rather, they are concerned with creating a space of 'making', of doing something for its own sake and for the fun of it while still keeping an eye out for something that might be useful one day in the 'normal' line of research. They are not meant as inspiration per se, and they are not meant to be the first step in a big revolution. Rather, they are meant to provide a space for 'poking at' the world in a way where one outcome will perhaps be that existing conceptions of how the world is constructed are pushed just a tiny bit. Even if only temporarily and even if the effect is only transient.

## Conclusions

I have argued that creative workshops at conferences that rarely address creative explorations in an open workshop format, can be understood as a form of temporary anarchistic activism. However, it is a particular kind of activism whose creative approach endows it with an almost ironic discourse where it becomes possible to comment on the ways of the world without squandering it. It seems that the workshops bypass existing discourses and paradigms by staging a space obviously meant to hold anything but lasting or 'serious' results. Still, it is also a space that only comes alive because participants are familiar with the existing discourses: all participants also participate in 'normal' IT practice. Already in the applications for participation they are already temporarily disabling the expectations to their 'normal' research. Participants are given the opportunity to use the creative practice to explore how both professional and personal development need more than streamlined and goal-oriented research. Thus, the function of the workshops is to demonstrate in a very concrete manner that every existing paradigm is nothing but a paradigm replaceable by other paradigms. Although this sounds simple and unsurprising - anyone not fueled by a techno-determinist drive will know this already - but even this simple recognition is complex; it is incredibly hard to transform paradigms, to 'snap out of it' and envision something else.

The primary strength of workshops like these is that they enable participants to 'play at research', to play around with alternatives in an 'unserious' way. This is possible, I have argued, as a consequence of combining peculiar and sometimes silly materials with a peculiar and at times silly research event in disguise, the workshop. Combining materials and space in this way



opens “cracks and fissures” needed for the participants to leave their normal research reality and buy into this one, even if only temporarily. Even if many participants also work with ‘soft materials’ and ‘soft computing’ in their everyday research practice, it is rarely (if ever) with the ironic distance and in that carefree way that the workshops prepare the ground for. So this is also serious research, even if they contain an almost infinite amount of silly aspects - including my own objects. They can be understood as a way of discursively constructing alternative futures and realities without participants being limited by their understanding of what technology is and can do. The workshops stage a space where everything is possible and should be tried out. The explicit focus on being creative through using a wide range of materials, without putting the word “creative” to the forefront of the workshop text, thus seems to be used as a resource to thinking the world differently, to think futures through explorative play. The playful approach and the very untechnological materials manage to capture visions of possible futures that are not yet conscious. And the quite experimental approach is an important way of being creative in a world that is often incredibly expensive and demanding to do research in. When the ‘imperfect’ technology meet the ‘perfect’ visions of the future (cf [2]), these workshops playfully recognise that technology should be appropriated and not just accepted in relation to whatever agenda the producer or research community might (implicitly) have.

Like in Bey’s TAZ, it becomes possible to view these fun and highly rewarding workshops as temporary autonomous zones of research and innovation where the material is a co-player rather than something which determines the result. In addition, these workshops

implicitly work from the assumption that all participants somehow implicitly understand, that creative work in one discourse or domain (yarns, textiles, fuse beads and toys that have seen better days) can affect another discourse or domain (research and development). So the effect outside of the workshop space could be that participants will move on out into the conference (and back into their respective research labs and environments) with experience with how a few simple means allow for questioning the current way of envisioning possible future technologies and discourses.

However, just like a TAZ disappears as soon as the system gets the wind of it, it is not easy to put into words what these workshops *actually* mean to research without it vanishing between my fingers as I type. It is undoubtedly incredibly fun to work on a hat that can call my friend on Skype, but it very quickly becomes incredibly silly and impossible to see how it would ever be possible to see the value of this in ‘the real world’ where hats never call anyone and where very few of my gadgets are made out of yarn with a crochet needle. Still, if you spend two days with an engineer, who almost desperately tries to make something on a sewing machine, while I equally desperate try to make my hat call Canada, we are, even if only temporarily, forced to think about the status and nature of the objects and gadgets currently surrounding us.

Because maybe the free knitters were right in believing that big change doesn’t come unless you realise that it could all begin with your knitting needles and the nearest ball of red cotton yarn.

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