

Algorithmic Craft: Tools and Practices For Creating Useful and Decorative Objects With Code

by

Jennifer Jacobs

Submitted to the Department of Media Arts and Sciences
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Abstract

The accessibility, diversity, and functionality of modern computer systems make computer programming (hereafter programming) useful in many realms of human study and advancement. Visual and physical art, craft, and design are interrelated domains that offer exciting possibilities when combined with programming. Unfortunately, use of programming is currently limited as a medium for art and design, especially by young adults and amateurs. Many potential users view programming as highly specialized, difficult, inaccessible, and only relevant as a career path in science, engineering or business fields, rather than as a mode of personal expression. Despite this perception, programming has the potential to correspond well with traditional, physical art-making practices. By forging a strong connection between programming and the design and fabrication of personally relevant physical objects, it may be possible to foster meaningful experiences in both programming and design for novice practitioners. The combination of digital fabrication technologies with computational design serves as one such connection.

Thesis Supervisor: Leah Buechley
Title: Associate Professor

“The type of work which modern technology is most successful in reducing or even eliminating is skillful, productive work of human hands, in touch with real materials of one kind or another. In an advanced industrial society, such work has become exceedingly rare. A great part of the modern neurosis may be due to this very fact; for the human being enjoys nothing more to be creatively, usefully, productively engaged with both his hands and his brains.”

E.F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful* (1973)

Acknowledgments

This is the acknowledgements section. You should replace this with your own acknowledgements.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Computation is a driving force in our world. The power and ubiquity of modern computer systems have made the skill of computer programming (hereafter programming) relevant to a wide range of human studies and disciplines. Most commonly, programming is viewed as an essential component of science, engineering, and business related applications[3]. As a result, many nascent programmers view programming as highly specialized, difficult, inaccessible, and only relevant as a career path in those particular fields. In reality, computation is a broad discipline with many applications, ranging from professional to personal. Foremost programming can serve as a medium for personal expression, through applications in art and design. With the emergence of digital fabrication technology, In addition, programming provides the means to design and produce useful objects and devices, not only on at an industrial scale, but also on a personal and individual scale [?]. When programming is used create unique, functional physical objects, new possibilities emerge in the way people design, the types of objects people create, and role programming can play in peoples' lives. Computational design, the practice of programming to create form, structure and ornamentation, is a new way to design. When paired with digital fabrication technology, computational design allows people to make physical objects by writing code. My objective is to examine the combination of computational design, digital fabrication and traditional arts and crafts for the production of functional decorative objects. I define this domain with the term algorithmic craft. In this thesis,

I will define the affordances of algorithmic craft and describe the development and dissemination of three tools to support novice practitioners in this domain. The process of bridging the spaces between textual programming language, visual design, and physical construction however, is not self-evident and raises many practical and theoretical questions. What are the important design principles to consider when creating programming environments for physical design? How do we compellingly link textual code with visual designs and what are the appropriate intersection points between textual manipulation and visual manipulation? What support is required to help people move back and forth from programming to building real objects in a way that is comfortable, expressive and pleasurable? How can we remove the technical challenges in translating code into an object that can be successfully fabricated, while still supporting a wide variety of design styles, aesthetics and approaches? Finally, how can we interlink the often disparate processes of physical prototyping with digital design and programming in a way that creatively reinforces both physical and virtual modes of working?

Outline general thesis here...

Chapter 2

Motivation and Background

“The mathematicians patterns, like the painters or the poets must be beautiful; the ideas like the colours or the words, must fit together in a harmonious way. Beauty is the first test: there is no permanent place in the world for ugly mathematics.”

G. H. Hardy [2]

2.1 Computational Design

The practice of computational design is fundamentally different from contemporary design. Due to the multitudes of approaches among different designers, it ultimately futile to attempt to describe a single standard design process. It is however useful to point out several key features of computational design that stand in contrast with the conventional design.

Both computational and conventional designers begin with a design problem. Conventional designers often proceed by roughing out a number of specific solutions to this problem. These early solutions are evaluated against one another for their successes and drawbacks, and from this evaluation a smaller set of more refined solutions are produced. This iterative process may continue, often through the incorporation of outside feedback, until a single solution is reached that is sufficiently refined and successful in addressing the initial problem. This highly simplified summary approximately describes the conventional iterative design process. Computational design

incorporates many of the iterative principles of conventional design, but differs significantly in its approach. Rather than begin by developing a concrete initial solution to the initial design problem, the computational designer must first formalize the elements of the problem into a set of rules. The designer then creates a system based on these rules that is capable of producing a variety of solutions, depending on the input criteria it is given. In its simplest form, this system may consist of a single algorithm with static input and limited output solutions. More frequently however, the computational design process produces complex systems that act on upon a wide range of input criteria and parameters, and can produce nearly infinite number of design solutions. Iteration in computational design then takes the form of incremental adjustments to the system. Naturally, many of the solutions produced by an initial system fail to address original design problem. By sampling a number of outputs from a system, the designer can "tweak" or make adjustments to the rules that govern the system, eventually resulting in more and more desirable output solutions. This process of sampling and tweaking is continued until the designer is satisfied with a given range of outputs. The designer can then vary the input to the system and can select among the resulting solutions.

While the process of computational design can be distinguished from conventional design, the two fields are compatible with one another. Aside from a wholly different approach, computational design can also be considered as a means of extending traditional design practice through several key affordances: These include the following:

- **Precision:** Computation supports high levels of numerical precision with relatively little effort on the part of the designer.
- **Automation:** Computation allows for rapid automation of repetitive tasks. Automation often plays a key role in enabling the development and transformation of complex patterns and structures, through the combination of large numbers of simple elements in an ordered and structured manner.
- **Generativity and randomness:** Computation allows for the programmer to create algorithms which when run, allow for the computer to autonomously

produce unique and often unexpected designs.

- **Parameterization:** Computation allows users to specify a set of degrees of freedom and constraints of a model and then adjust the values of the degrees of freedom while maintaining the constraints of the original model [4].
- **Documentation and remixing:** Computationally generated designs are generated by a program, which can be shared with and modified by other designers. Because these programs are often text-based, they also serve as a form of documentation of the design process.

In combination with these affordances however, computational design also incorporates a number of challenges in the design process that are not present in traditional design:

- **Formalizing complex problems** As design problems grow in complexity, formalizing the problem in a manner that can be expressed programmatically becomes increasingly challenging. Writing an algorithm to generate a visual pattern is relatively simple, however writing a program to incorporate that pattern into the design of an entire garment is non-trivial.
- **Creating singularities:** A designer will often choose to deviate from a set pattern or structure at specific points in order to create a special emphasis in that area. Because computational design is governed by a systematized ruleset, the methods of breaking these rules at arbitrary points is are often unclear and tedious to implement.
- **Selecting a final design:** The systematic approach to computational design gives the designer the ability to produce extremely large numbers of solutions to a single design problem. While this is useful in situations where multiple solutions are required, when a single design must be chosen, the process of deciding on a solution is often difficult and sometimes arbitrary, especially if the decision is based on aesthetic criteria.

2.2 Digital Fabrication

expand section Although computational design must be conducted on a computer to some degree, the artifacts generated by computational design are not restricted to the screen. Digital fabrication technology provides the opportunity to translate programmatically generated designs to physical form. Digital Fabrication is the process of using computer-controlled machines to fabricate objects specified by a digital design file or tool path. The machines that encompass digital fabrication range from 3D printers, laser cutters, and computer numerically controlled (CNC) milling machines, to vinyl cutters, CNC embroidery machines and knitting machines, and even inkjet printers. Digital fabrication shares many of the affordances of computational design. In particular, it allows for the creation of physical objects of great complexity without formal skill in craft or extensive manual labor. Digital fabrication also allows for the rapid production of small volumes of similar or identical objects. Lastly, because the artifacts produced through digital fabrication are derived from digital files, anyone with access to the file, and a similar fabrication machine can create a copy of the object, or incorporate elements of it into a new design.

Digital fabrication is also compelling for its own reasons. Currently, digital fabrication machines are rapidly decreasing in price and increasing in availability [?]. As a result, we are seeing the emergence of personal fabrication, wherein sophisticated manufacturing technologies are becoming available to regular people [?]. Excluding personal 3D printers which are generally limited to a few varieties of ABS plastic, most personal fabrication machines can work with a wide range of materials. Laser cutters work well with traditional materials such as wood, paper and cloth. Vinyl cutters can also be used on cloth and paper, as well as cut vinyl patterns which can be used for screen printing. The current stage of personal fabrication is estimated to be at the same place as personal computing in the 1970s [?] **add section on computer aided design**

2.3 Algorithmic Craft

The conjunction of computational design and digital fabrication has the potential to allow individuals to use programming to express their aesthetic concerns in the creation of objects. This is important because aesthetic expression through design is a substantial part of intellectual development [4] and an important part of peoples lives. These machines offer the potential to extend and innovate traditional forms of design, constructing and crafting by allowing for greater levels of automated complexity and precision in physical objects, and correspond well with the practice of programming. importance of materials- craft as domain of materiality, design and programing as abstractions in many cases, but deal very directly with materiality when applied to the real world- craft offers direct connection to this - citation from rosner article craft vs design

2.4 Challenges in broad participation in computational design and digital fabrication

Despite the opportunity for casual, non-professional engagement in computational design and digital fabrication, this domain is largely limited to experts and professionals for a number of reasons. In a practical context, new practitioners in this field are confronted with the difficult process of translating their code-based design to a format that is compatible with the target fabrication machine. Furthermore, the challenges involved in designing complex objects from multiple digitally fabricated parts are extremely difficult to tackle for casual users. There are also severe limitations on computational design software for novices capable of supporting digital fabrication. As we discuss in the following related work section, the majority of traditional CAD tools do not contain computational design capabilities that are accessible to nicest users. Similarly, novice oriented programing environments lack the functionality to allow novices to produce designs that are suitable for fabrication. More broadly, there are significant perceptual barriers to participation. There persists among the general

public a limited perception of the applications of programing. Many people consider programing to be irrelevant to their interests, and therefore lack motivation to pursue what they perceive to be a highly specialized and difficult undertaking [12]. There are also prevailing perceptions of digital fabrication which may hinder casual engagement. Personal fabrication technology is often portrayed as a precursor to the production of replicator-like technology which can instantiate literally anything by building it directly from atoms. This projection of future technology is exciting to think about, but I argue that it also acts as a barrier to immediate widespread engagement with existing forms of digital fabrication, by setting up unreal expectations for this technology and portraying it as technology that facilitates new forms of consumerism, as opposed to being a new tool for personal creation and expression. This perspective also eliminates the need or desire for human engagement in the fabrication process, eliminating the entry points for craft:

A central element of these and other visions of the future is that craft is done for us: Kitchens tell us what and how to cook, eliminating the creativity and pleasure of cooking from scratch with whats on hand; object printers create flawless prototypes, eliminating messily glued-together chipboard and toothpicks. In this new world, craft becomes fetishthe proudly displayed collection of vinyl records shelved alongside an iPod and digital files [?].

There is also the tendency to trivialize the hobbyist applications of digital fabrication when analyzed in a research context. In the domain of Human Computer Interaction (HCI), researchers often focus on the hedonistic properties technologically oriented DIY practices as opposed to the utility of the resultant artifacts or their ability to generate profit. Pleasure and self-expression are central components of hobbyist and craft-oriented computation and digital fabrication, however these qualities do not come at the cost of generating artifacts that are practical, functional, and sellable [?]. The trend of separating hobbyist practice as merely fun in contrast to professional practical applications overshadows some of the most interesting practical possibilities that emerge through amateur use of this technology.

Chapter 3

Related Tools and Research

There are numerous forms of CAD software and programing environments. Within the realm of computational design and digital fabrication, there are 4 primary categories of existing tools that directly relate to my study of computational design and digital fabrication: professional computational-design tools, entry-level programing environments, and novice-oriented computer-aided-design (CAD) tools. While certain qualities are shared between these categories, several key distinctions exist between each group of tools.

3.1 Professional Computational Design Tools

A couple of forms of professional computational-design tools exist. Foremost, many popular graphic-user-interface (GUI) CAD applications include a feature that allows the user to automate certain elements of the program through scripting or programing. For example, in Adobe software like Photoshop and Illustrator, it is possible to write JavaScript-based programs to automate various application procedures. Similarly, 3D modeling tools such as Maya and Blender feature the ability to script behaviors in languages that are syntactically similar to Perl and Python respectively. This scripting is usually omitted from the primary menus and interfaces of the applications that feature it. There are also professional tools that are explicitly developed for computational design. The most prominent example is Grasshopper, a third-party

add-on for the Rhinoceros 3D modeling tool. Grasshopper is a data-flow programming environment that lets users combine a variety of modules and blocks to create and adjust 3D models in Rhino. A textual coding module is also available and allows users to integrate C# scripts using the Rhino API into their patch, although the user must have an understanding of the basic principles of programming in order to effectively use this functionality.

DesignScript, a more recent computational design tool, developed by Autodesk, is a domain specific text-based programming environment and language that contains methods to generate and manipulate geometric models that are compatible with existing Autodesk applications. DesignScript itself functions as an add on to the Autodesk AutoCad software. DesignScript is intended for use by experienced designers and 3d modelers who possess a range of programming expertise. The language syntax is based on C#, however it features the ability to operate in both associative and imperative paradigms, in an effort to support a pedagogical transition between basic and more complex forms of computational design [?].

Lastly, OpenSCAD is a script-based constructive solid geometry modeling tool developed specifically for CAD applications. OpenSCAD contains a custom programming language in which the user can create descriptions of 3d models in a textual format, and display them by compiling the script. This scripting behavior provides the user with precise control over the modeling process and enables the creation of designs that are defined by configurable parameters, however this control comes at the cost of requiring the user to be familiar with textual programming and scripting. In fact, OpenSCAD is explicitly developed for programmers and relies on textual input exclusively as the mechanism for design. In addition, unlike the prior tools mentioned, OpenSCAD is both free and open source, and many variations and derivatives of it exist [?].

In the context of digital fabrication, one of the most important elements of these professional tools is their ability to import and export a wide variety of file formats, thus facilitating the transitions between a digital design and the required file type for a specific fabrication tool. Despite their power, and due to their high cost and complex

feature set, these professional tools are extremely difficult for amateurs to access and use. It is also important to note that with the exception of OpenSCAD, the examples listed are only available as plugins or add-ons or are developed to supplement an existing graphical tool, rather than serve as the primary method of design. In some cases this status as a form secondary functionality adds a set of practical barriers to independent use. The scripting tools in illustrator and photoshop are difficult to locate, Grasshopper only functions on Windows versions of Rhino, and Design Script requires the prior purchase of AutoCAD to operate. Although these practical barriers can be overcome, their existence often prevents less experienced users from gaining access. In addition, the positioning of computational functionality as secondary to the primary method of design points to a larger ideological classification of these forms of design as a specialized and exclusive, rather than a primary method of design.

3.2 Entry-level CAD Tools

A subset of CAD tools have also been created that are designed to be more accessible to a wider range of people. These tools provide an option for individuals who lack the experience and access to professional level tools, however they also provide an opportunity for more casual participation in CAD. SketchUp is a 3d modeling tool developed by Google to enable easier forms of 3D modeling. Although SketchUp was not explicitly created to allow people to design for CNC and digital fabrication, several 3rd-party add ons exist that allow users to export designs to file formats that are compatible with a variety of fabrication machine [?]. TinkerCad is another 3d modeling tool designed for entry level users. As opposed to SketchUp, TinkerCad is explicitly developed to assist in designing for 3d printers and has built in functionality to allow users to export their designs to the .stl format which is compatible with 3D printing [?]. Autodesk has also produced several entry level 3d-modeling applications as a part of their 123D series. Many of these applications are designed to interface with digital fabrication, including 123D Make which allows users to convert stock or uploaded 3d models into a series of flat parts which can be fabricated on 2-axis

machines like laser cutters, and 123D Creature, which enables users to design a variety of creatures from a set of basic parts and then order a 3d printed model of their finished creature [?]. Autodesk Research has also developed MeshMixer, an application for the intuitive merging and manipulating high resolution triangle meshes. MeshMixer was released to the public and has since become a popular 3d design tool for hobbyist 3D printer users. All of the entry level tools listed above vary in their specific approach to creating more accessible forms of CAD. In general they feature a trade off between limited functionality and power, in favor of a simplified tool set and an easier learning curve. Despite these restrictions, it is possible to use these entry level tools to develop highly complex and sophisticated models [show example image of mesh mixer model](#). A more serious limitation of these tools is their ephemerality. Because entry level CAD tools are often free, and more frequently web based applications, it is common for them to suddenly become unavailable or no longer supported by the company that produces them. Tinkercad serves as a recent example of this wherein the parent company decided to transition to focusing on professional-level CAD tools and as a result, closed down the Tinkercad website and cut off access to the application [footnote about tinkercad recently being acquired by autodesk](#). Several of these entry-level tools feature some form of scripting or programing functionality. A plugin for Sketchup allows users to automate certain actions by using the Ruby-based SketchUp API. TinkerCad allows users to create Shape Scripts, which are parametric models defined by javascript code. MeshMixer has an C++ API which is not yet publicly available, but is provided to interested parties upon request. While these computational tools suggest compelling possibilities, similar to the professional level tools listed above, they are positioned as secondary ways of interacting, and are much less deliberate than the primary features of the application.

3.3 Learning-Oriented programming tools

In addition to entry level CAD tools, a number of tools and applications have been created to introduce inexperienced programmers to the realm of computer science.

Logo, a computational drawing program, serves as the seminal novice programming language founded on principles of constructionism and embodiment [9]. The Scratch visual programming language is a notable successor to Logo, and allows users to create interactive projects by combining command blocks rather than writing textual code [11]. Alice is another programming environment that relies on visual programming, but is targeted towards an older user group than Scratch [3]. Turtle Art [16] and Design Blocks [2] are two visual programming languages inspired by Logo that are designed specifically for visual composition. Processing is a text-based programming environment designed for easy learning, and directed toward artists, designers, and inexperienced programmers [10]. Logo, Turtle Art, Design Blocks, and Processing facilitate computational drawing and, therefore, can be viewed as computational-design environments. There remains a gap, however, between novice-oriented programming environments and the novice-oriented CAD tools. In direct contrast to the novice oriented CAD tools described in the preceding section, although learning oriented programming tools can provide an excellent platform for generating digital computational design work, they often lack explicit features for generating and exporting designs that are compatible digital fabrication. It is possible to create work-arounds to this. For example in processing, users can download and install community-created libraries that allow for .stl, .dxf and .pdf export, enabling a sub group of users to use processing as a design tool for 3d printing, and laser cutting. The independent development of export functionality for tools like Processing demonstrates that there is significant interest in combining computational design and digital fabrication. If we wish to open this space for entry level practitioners however, we must design tools that exhibit the tools and techniques for computational design for fabrication as their primary functionality.

3.4 Novel Fabrication and CAD tools

In addition to these tools, there are a number of research projects involving novel forms of fabrication and software tools that demonstrate new approaches for com-

putational design and digital fabrication. Sketch It, Make It is a 2D CAD tool that allows users to constrain their designs through gestures made using a digital drawing tablet [14]. Spatial Sketch is a tool that allows users to create abstract 3D sketches via their gestures, and then translates the sketches into a set of slices, which can be fabricated and combined into a finished piece [17]. SketchChair allows users to design their own chair by sketching with a computer stylus [13]. The resultant design can then be cut on a computer-numerical controlled (CNC) milling machine and assembled into a 3D object. SketchChair includes a simulation tool that allows users to test the usability of their chairs before they cut them. FlatCAD seeks to connect programming and digital fabrication and allows users to build customized construction kits with a laser cutter by programming in FlatLang, a novice-oriented programming language modeled on Logo [8]. Spirogator is a processing based tool that allows users to digitally customize a set of hypotrochoid geared-drawing tools and then view a simulation of those tools in action. The user then has the option of either exporting the resulting design generated by the digital gears and fabricating it directly, or exporting the file paths for the gears themselves, and fabricating them on a laser cutter, to be used as physical drawing tools [?]. These examples share several important elements. They are restricted to a relatively narrow domain, or end product, but still support a wide range of design variation and personal expression within this domain. They contain intuitive and familiar methods of interaction often in the form of sketching, moving sliders. They contain explicit features for making the process of digital fabrication easier for new practitioners, and reduce the possibility of creating designs that will be infeasible to fabricate or are physically unstable. Spirogator and Sketch Chair’s simulation tools are particularly interesting in this regard, as they assist the user in predicting some of the behavior of the resultant physical artifact prior to its fabrication. These qualities of domain-specificity, design flexibility, intuitive interaction and **give this a better name** practical support for fabrication are properties that should be incorporated in future tools in this area. **/Garment-Creation CAD and Fabrication tools Sensitive Couture parsing patterns into 3d garments Sketch Based Garment Design Art quilt?**

Chapter 4

Objectives

As indicated by the analysis of existing CAD and computational design tools. Many wonderful options exist to support novice entry into computer science. In addition, new tools are emerging to support novices in Computer Aided Design and digital fabrication. At this point however, is a lack of tools, which attempt to bridge these two spaces and make it feasible for people without significant technological experience to combine computational design and digital fabrication. The goal of my masters thesis is to explore and evaluate possible methods of bridging this space by developing tools that allow for casual, craft-oriented applications of digital fabrication and computational design. My objective is to better understand the relationship between textual programming language and visual design, investigate the iteration between code and physical object and examine strategies that support independent amateur use of computational design and digital fabrication.

4.1 Functional Properties of Algorithmic Crafting Tools

Based on my examination of related CAD and computational design tools I hypothesized that the following functional properties are necessary for an effective algorithmic craft software:

- **Emphasis on computational design:** Programing should be the chief method of generating and manipulating designs, and this focus should be reflected in the interface of the software.
- **Novice-oriented programing syntax:** The programing syntax and application programing interface (API) should be designed for novice programmers, and should be limited to methods and structures relevant to the task of design.
- **Design methods that facilitate digital fabrication:** The software should include programing and drawing methods that allow for the production of designs that are suitable for digital fabrication, including shape boolean operations, and support for exporting to relevant file formats.
- **Prioritization of visualization and simulation:** Users should be given ample and highly responsive visual feedback to inform their programming decisions.
- **Simple workflow from software to fabrication:** The transition from the design tool to the fabrication device should require as few intermediary steps as possible.
- **Free and open-source:** The software should be freely available, and able to function on multiple platforms with low requirements for computational processing power to afford high levels of access to casual users. If possible, the software should also be open source, in order to encourage the proliferation of additional novice oriented tools that can be developed for the specific needs of distinct user groups.
- **Domain specificity:** In order to ensure the usability of the software, it should be constrained to a the design of a particular set of end products, or crafting techniques. Or, if the software is general purpose, it should be packaged with a set of well documented example designs and projects that clearly demonstrate its key applications.

- **Fabrication and craft-specific documentation:** In addition to the documentation of the application and programming language, the fabrication and crafting techniques that are compatible with the software should be thoughtfully documented and provided to users. This documentation should include details on suitable materials, fabrication machine access and settings, and tutorials on the craft components of example projects.

4.2 Evaluation Criteria

In addition to these functional properties, I generated a set of evaluation criteria for any prospective algorithmic crafting software. A successful tool should produce the following results:

- **Allow users to successfully create physical artifacts:** The artifacts themselves should be both durable and used or in the creators life after completion.
- **Afford a wide degree of variation in design and expression:** The personal stylistic and aesthetic preferences of the creator should be apparent in the resultant artifact.
- **Enable people to understand the functionality and utility of the programs they write** Individuals should emerge from the process with a general understanding of some of the key components of computer programming, with an ability to articulate how these components function in their design.
- **Allow users to create objects and designs they would have difficulty generating with conventional techniques** The tool should enable the use of the affordances of computational design expressed in the Section 2.1, specifically precision, visual complexity, generativity and stylistic abstraction.
- **Engender in users a positive, enjoyable experience:** The tool and subsequent crafting activities should be pleasurable.

- **Foster a sense of confidence:** After working with the tool, people should have increased confidence in their ability to successfully program, design, and use digital fabrication tools.

Over the course of my masters thesis, I developed and tested three successive algorithmic crafting software tools, Codeable Objects, a domain specific programming library for the design and production of lamps, Soft Objects, an expanded version of Codeable Objects aimed at computational fashion design and DressCode, an integrated programming and visual design environment. In the following three chapters, I detail the development, feature set and evaluation of each tool in accordance with the above criteria.

Chapter 5

Design Tools

introduction to design tools

5.1 Codeable Objects

Codeable Objects is computational design tool that allowed people to design a laser cut lamp. The choice of a lamp allowed for a relatively broad design space wherein aesthetics were a primary consideration, while still retaining the qualities of functionality and utility in the finished product. Lamps possess an established function, but offer a great deal of flexibility and personal freedom in the aesthetics and form. In addition, there is an established history of creating DIY lamps via digital fabrication. The Instructables community tutorial website has an entire section devoted to DIY lamps, and many examples of patterns that use a laser cutter for fabrication.

5.1.1 Motivation

One of the restrictions of many of these examples is that they require the person making the lamp to directly emulate the design provided by the creator of the tutorial. If the person wishes to deviate from the original design, they need to use a CAD tool like Adobe Illustrator or Solid Works[1]. As mentioned in Section 3.1,

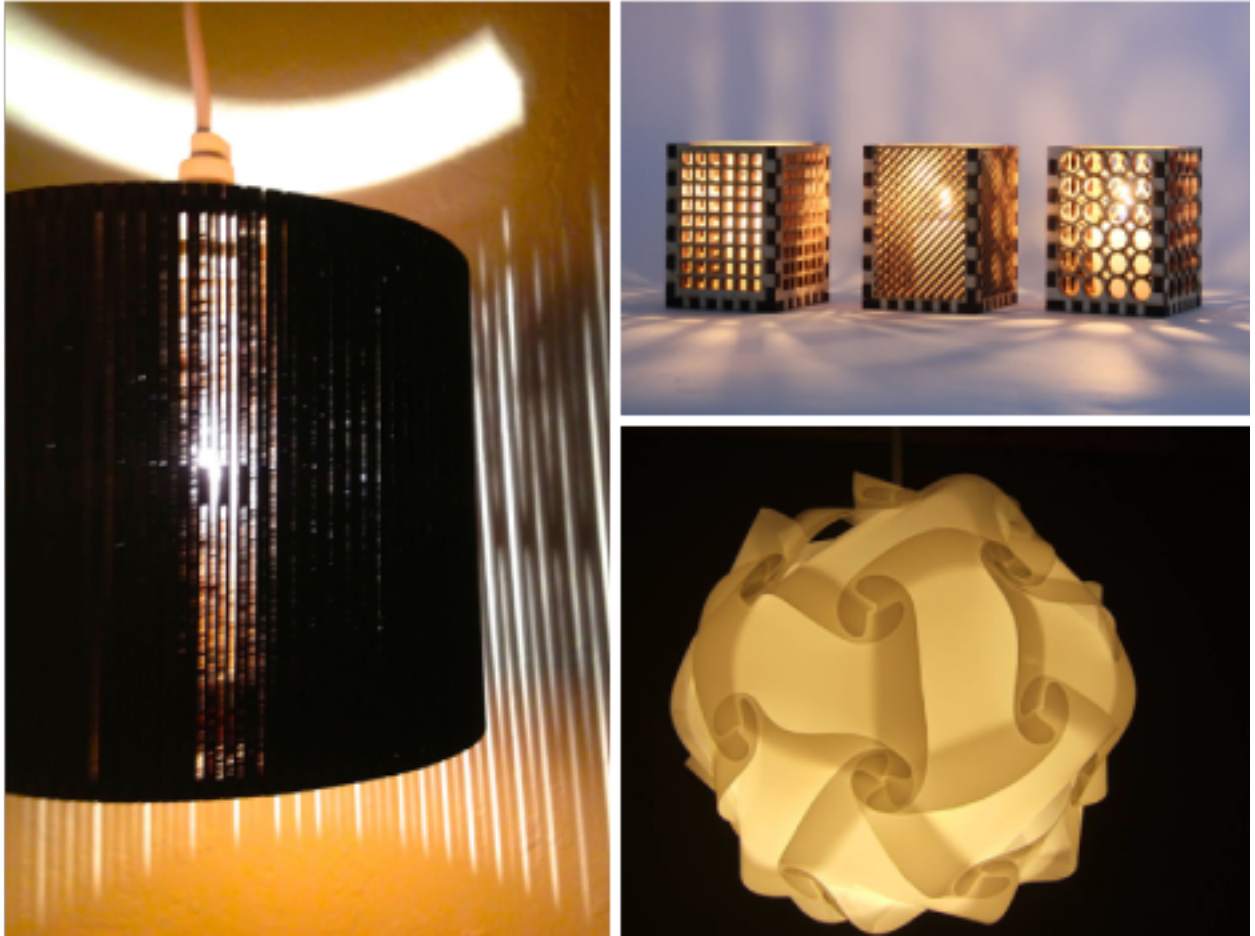


Figure 5-1: a selection of laser cut lamps from Instructables

professional CAD tools like Solid Works are often difficult to access and use for casual practitioners. In addition, during my personal experience in using a non-parametric tool like illustrator to design, I often found I had to resort to fabricating numerous sample pieces of in order to ensure the joints and form would function correctly in the final piece. If I made a mistake, or decided I wanted to modify the design, I lost time and materials in the fabricating process, and had to endure the tedious process of adjusting correcting each individual part.

One of the most frequent applications of a laser cutter is to create 3D forms by assembling 2D press fit pieces in a frame-like structure. I found that when creating 3D forms that were curved, it was extremely challenging in traditional 2D CAD

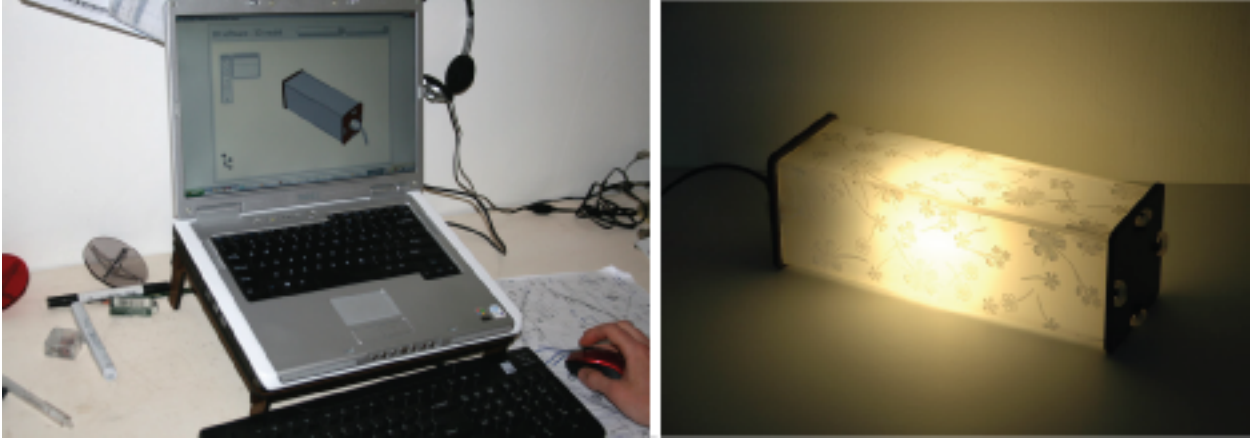


Figure 5-2: Instructables lamp tutorial with SolidWorks design process

software to correctly size and design parts which would fit the faces of the form. This was particularly relevant to lamp design, wherein it was necessary to create shades to diffuse the light. The shades also provided an excellent space for incorporating styles and patterns into the lamp. The combined tasks of simplified design and customization, parametric manipulation, and the calculation and conversion of a 3D form to 2D parts indicated that computational design would be a good match for the task of designing and fabricating a laser cut lamp.

5.1.2 Tool Description and workflow

The objective of the first version of Codeable Objects was simple: to create a tool that allowed to design a custom lamp by describing the form and the pattern of the shades, which they could then fabricate and assemble. The lamp itself was comprised of 4 basic parts, a wooden press fit frame, a set of vellum pieces that fit over the frame to act as a shade, a set of cardstock pieces with a pattern that fit over the shades, and a commercial made light fixture that fit into the frame (see figure: 5-3.)

Codeable Objects was developed as a programming library for Processing and contained a set of pre-defined programming methods that allow the user to describe the lamp, and define the tool paths for all three materials. For the first version of the library,

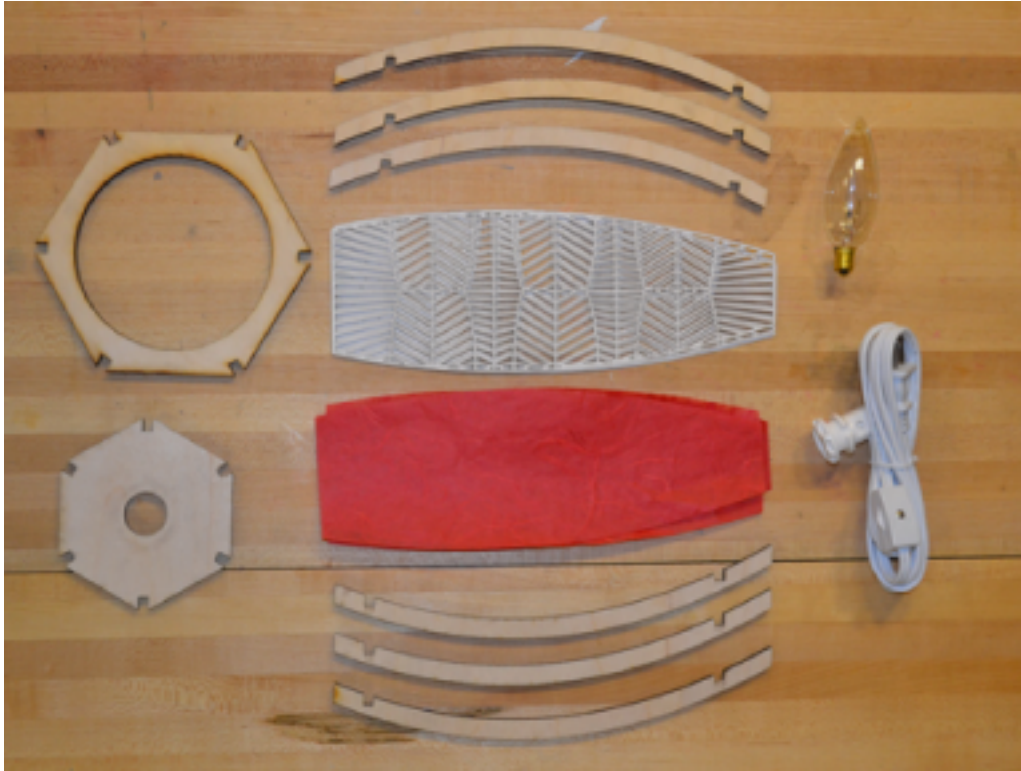


Figure 5-3: the individual parts of a lamp

all design took place via textual programming. Within the Processing IDE one imports and initialize the controller class of the library, and uses it to call four main functions that determine the height, top width, middle width and bottom width of the lamp. These 4 parameters are used to determine the form of the lamp, by generating the equation of a parabola with 3 intersection points. By rotating this parabola round the y-axis, it was possible to generate a closed 3-dimensional ellipsoid form. The library also provided access to an additional set of methods that control over a number of other parameters in describing the form of the lamp, including the number of sides, the resolution of the curve and the position of the internal structural supports. When the code is compiled, the application displays a graphic view containing 3d wireframe model of the current lamp as defined by the parameters.

Workflow description Workshop Workshop results

5.1.3 Discussion

Because of their prior expertise, the experiences of the majority of the participants in the first study are not indicative of the feasibility of Codeable Objects for novice programmers. Their experiences provide valuable contrast to the experience of the novice coders in the successive workshops however, and provide important information about the usability and workflow of the software. Despite their experience in programming however, the experienced programmers in the lamp workshop exhibited limited knowledge of computational design prior to the start of the workshop. When asked in the pre-workshop surveys how they thought programming, design and craft could be combined, the general response was either uncertain, or as method to create dynamic interactivity, rather than a tool for the design of form and pattern:

“You can combine software and hardware and make craft more dynamic (e.g. sensors). [Lamp Participant pre 1]

“[Programming] gives [you] the ability to make something dynamic. [Lamp Participant pre 3]

Following the workshop, the participants were generally pleased with the creative affordances of the tool, and described how the software enabled them to expand their programming abilities to the realm of art and craft with greater success:

“I think programming makes designing more accessible because you don’t have to be able to draw or paint. [Lamp participant post 4]

“I love the idea of being able to combine my interest in programming for creative expressions. [Lamp participant post 6]

There was also an awareness among several participants about the practical benefits of combining computational design and digital fabrication:

“I understand now how programming can be used for quick prototyping and mock-ups that can be used to inform final design decisions. This is easy [and] helpful when using physical materials where mistakes can be costly. [Lamp participant post 2]

“Using programming in the design process adds some exciting and unique capabilities over traditional design and crafting, including mixing in different algorithm and

Several participants also put forth detailed critiques of the programming process, which brought into focus concerns about the practice of computational design itself. One participant reacted against defining the generative qualities of the Voronoi diagram patterns as a design method:

“Changing the parameters didn’t always generate the pattern you have in mind. It was more like generating a few semi-random patterns and you choose one that looks good. It is rather a trying-and-choosing rather than designing /making something you planned to have. I think ”design” involves ”intention” and ”planning.” Programming, crafting, and design should be combined in the way that entails prior planning and intentions as opposed to cutting together the semi-random choices, which could be good but I wouldn’t call that design. [Lamp participant post 6]”

This comment addresses the concern that the attributes of randomness and generativity do not automatically lead to optimal or good design decisions. Some deciding factor has to play a role in the process, but the designers role in the deciding process is often ambiguous. This criticism touches on a core debate about the role of conscious design and the restriction of intuitive creativity in computational practices overall, however it is particularly relevant to computational design. The emergence of comments like this are encouraging, because they reflect the engagement of the participants, not just with the task at hand, but in a critical evaluation of the creative implications of this form of creation. This comment however also highlights a key restriction of Codeable Objects. While it is ambiguous to the extent at which adjusting the parameters and input values to a system constitutes design, the task of defining the algorithms which shape the system itself are decidedly a form of design. With Codeable Objects however, the user is unable to modify the core algorithms which define the range of forms and patterns that are possible, unless they alter the source code of the library itself. When evaluated as a tool for algorithmic craft, Codeable Objects could have done a better job of supporting some of the deeper components of computational design, in particular, the algorithmic abstraction of personal styles and aesthetics. The stylistic limitations contained in the tool most likely contributed to the high success rate in project completion, and the general attractiveness of the

resulting projects, but the experience of the workshop, provided the motivation for future tools to have better balance of stylistic and computational openness and accessibility for new programmers.

One last defining component of the Codeable Objects pilot workshop was the stark contrast between the nature of the challenges in the computational design and digital fabrication components and the crafting component. The difficulties people experienced while designing and fabricating their projects were often discrete, for example correcting for mathematical error in coordinate placement, or having the incorrect setting on the laser cutter. More complex problems sometimes arose in these contexts as well, such as confusing on the principles behind some of the more complex point generation algorithms, or the programming aspects in general, however they were seemingly aspects that could be addressed through verbal instruction and explanation. The challenges encountered in the crafting session were of a different quality, concerning the best techniques for assembling the parts so that the resulting product maintained an attractive appearance. Most participants were surprised at the amount of time required to complete the physical assembly, and were often frustrated when variations in the crafting process violated the precision and perfection of the digital design, and laser cut parts. Rather than addressing these difficulties through instruction and explanation, these were challenges that are best overcome through practice and experience with the materials. This contrast poses an interesting conflict for Algorithmic Craft in general. While both computational and hand crafting methods benefit from experience and practice, the approaches for solving problems differ significantly in programming and hand crafting. Programming often requires an analytical approach with an emphasis on consistency and regularity, whereas crafting requires a more intuitive process of responding and adjusting one's technique while in direct contact with the materials. How then, can algorithmic tools be presented in a manner that accustoms users to operating in both discrete and intuitive contexts, and how can these two modes of working inform one another?

5.2 Soft Objects

After an evaluation of the successes and limitations of the Codeable Objects library I made an effort to expand the library in a way that would allow for a broader range of computational design approaches and end products. In particular, I was interested in exploring the domain of algorithmically crafted garments and fashion accessories. Fashion is an exiting domain to connect to computation, because it appeals to groups of people who are often under-represented in computer science, particularly women and girls. In addition, because garments and accessories are wearable, computational fashion design requires the programmer to consider questions of comfort, sizing and personal taste and and style; a set of concerns not often associated with most computer programs. To explore computational fashion design in the context of algorithm craft, I expanded the Codeable Objects tool into a more general programing library named SoftObjects and evaluated it over a 10 day workshop with young people.

5.2.1 Motivation

5.2.2 Tool description

The Soft Objects library contains a set of methods that allows users to draw shapes and patterns and then export those shapes and patterns in a vector-file format that is compatible with x-y axis digital-fabrication machines. Similar to CodeableObjects, to use the library, a user imports it into the Processing environment and then writes and compiles code using the Processing editor. Soft Objects allows users to define and manipulate basic geometric primitives such as Points, Lines, Curves and Polygons. These primitives can then be collected within Pattern and Shape objectsstructures designed to capture surface decoration and 2D structure, respectivelyto form increasingly complex designs.

Soft Objects is formulated on an Object Oriented Programming (OOP) paradigm, which lets users create and manipulate collections of geometric primitivesPatterns and Shapes. This structure differs from Processings drawing API, which uses a functional

programming approach. The structure of Soft Objects enables users to simultaneously apply transformations to all of the elements in a collection that make up a complex pattern or shape. It is also possible to import scalar vector graphics files (SVGs) to incorporate pre-drawn designs as elements within a pattern or as a container for existing patterns.

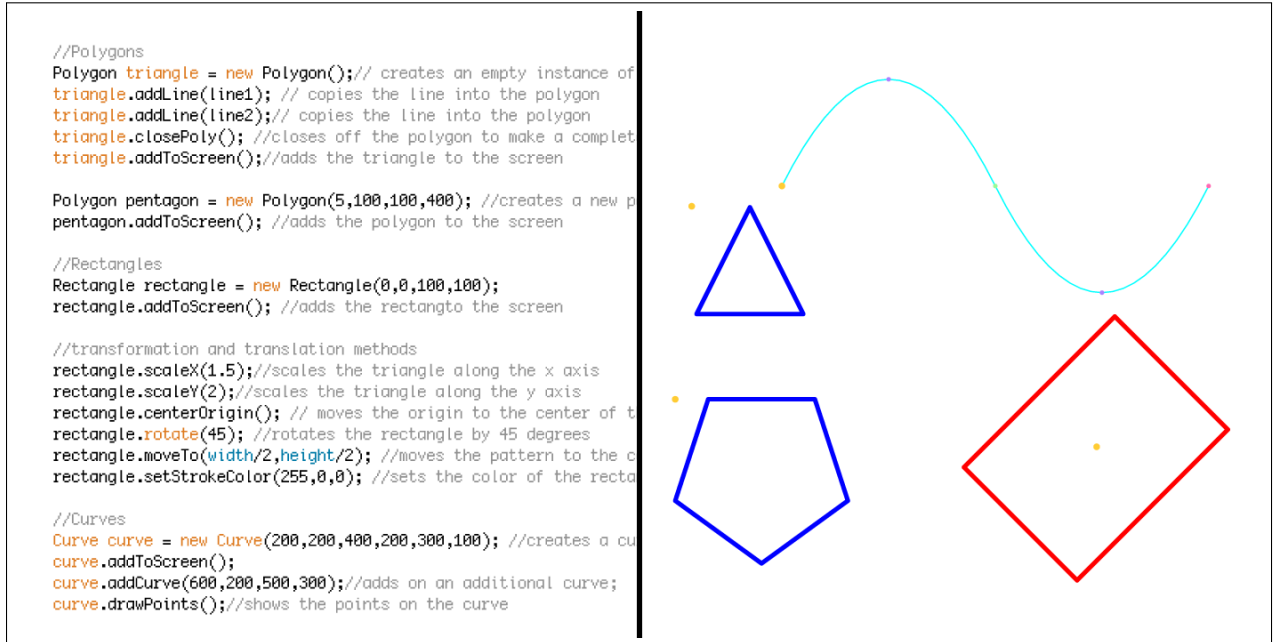


Figure 5-5: Soft Objects primitives

Users are presented with a 2D preview of their designs when they compile their code. Soft Objects supports a variety of digital-fabrication machines by allowing users to save designs to vector portable document format (PDF) files. PDFs can be used by different production tools, including ink-jet printers, vinyl cutters, laser cutters, and computationally controlled embroidery machines. Output from Soft Objects can be fabricated on essentially any x-y axis tool. 3D structures can be created by assembling fabricated pieces. Figure 5-6 demonstrates the workflow from code to a finished object. The Soft Objects library also contains a collection of pre-defined algorithmic patterns that can be initialized, including Voronoi diagrams, Koch curves,

and L-Systems, and an extensive set of example programs that users can modify and combine to produce individual results.

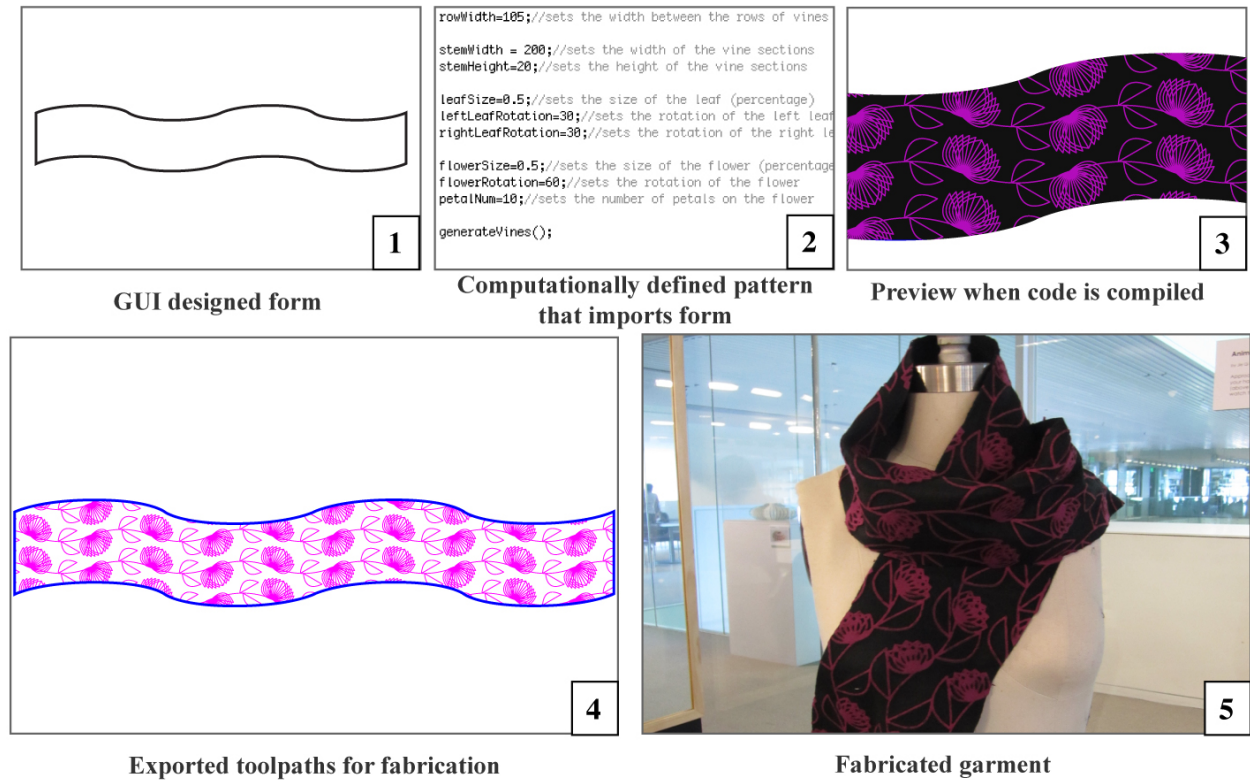


Figure 5-6: Soft Objects workflow

5.2.3 Workshop

The evaluation of Soft Objects was conducted during a 10-day workshop with a representative group of participantseight young adults, aged 11-17, 75% male and 25% female. A significant majority (88%) stated in pre-surveys that they had little or no prior experience in programming, and only one participant had prior experience in Processing. All of the participants indicated some level of prior experience in art, design, or craft. Most attributed their design or craft experience to art or drawing classes.

The workshop was conducted at the Nuvu Magnet Innovation Center for Young Minds. Participants were given 10 days to conceptualize and construct a garment using a combination of computational design, digital fabrication, and traditional sewing and crafting. The second study was more open than the first; participants could produce any type of garment they wished as long as components of it were computationally designed and digitally fabricated. During the workshop, participants were introduced to Soft Objects and the concept of computational fashion through a multi-step process that engaged participants in different levels of programming through the construction of different garments and accessories. First, participants were provided with a small set of example programs similar to the lamp workshop. This step allowed them to manipulate a core set of parameters to generate the pattern and form of a scarf, which they then cut on the laser cutter (Fig 3).

Second, participants were instructed in a number of primary programing concepts, including iteration, function definition, and the use of variables and primitive data-types. During this instruction, participants were guided through the process of independently using Soft Objects and generating their own programs from scratch. They used these programs to create a design for a wooden bracelet (Fig. 3), which was then laser cut and assembled. After these two initiation activities, these participants were asked to conceive their own garments and provided with the resources to design, prototype, and craft finished garments.

5.2.4 Results

Participants in the fashion workshop were successful in using programing and digital fabrication to design and produce finished garments. During the initiation activities, participants independently wrote and compiled programs of their own and produced physical products based on the design generated from that program. Furthermore, with assistance from the instructors, the participants were able to apply more sophisticated programing methods to produce a diverse set of final products (Fig 4). One pair of students developed an armor dress by writing a program that geometrically described a single scale shape, imported a dress pattern from Illustrator and filled

it with rows of scales that corresponded with the dimensions of the dress. Another pair created a geometrically inspired dress with a patterning of different-sized octagons and squares that were laser cut from starched fabric. Another student created American-flag-inspired pants using a program that generated random orderings of red and blue stripes on a white background. One group that was less interested in the process of sewing clothing created a program that generated a recursive virus-like pattern and then screen-printed the pattern on pre-made sweatshirts and t-shirts.

On the post survey, when asked if they were able to complete a finished project to their satisfaction, 100% of the fashion participants responded yes. The resultant garments were attractive and functional, indicated by the fact that participants from the fashion workshop kept and wore their creations. Direct comparison of the pre- and post-workshop surveys also demonstrated that on average, participants in the fashion workshop indicated their interest in crafting increased after the workshop, as did their enjoyment of the design process. Eighty-eight percent of the participants in the fashion workshop indicated that they felt more comfortable programming after the workshop than before.

5.3 DressCode

Motivation and design principles Tool Description Workflow description Workshop
Workshop results Curriculum building Curriculum results

Chapter 6

Discussion (rename)

Processes- planning vs experimentation Prototyping The role of craft The affordances of algorithmic fabrication - how best to communicate them? The aesthetics of computational design Critique in computational design

difficulty in reconciling practice and felt experience of craft with discrete knowledge of computation

Chapter 7

Future Directions

Version Control (The loss of design) Better selection mechanisms Longer-term studies
Targeted audience (revised)

Chapter 8

Conclusion

Appendix A

Tables

Table A.1: Armadillos

Armadillos	are
our	friends

Appendix B

Figures

Figure B-1: Armadillo slaying lawyer.

Figure B-2: Armadillo eradicating national debt.

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