

P / REFERENCES OF DESIGN

CHRONO-DISRUPTION: ANARCHAFEMINIST (GAME) DESIGN FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION.

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ABSTRACT | In discussions of social change, the temporal dimension often remains a silent observer, flattened by a singular focus on future outcomes that bypasses a richer canvas for designing and enacting impactful innovations.

With this short theoretical reflection, I want to underscore the pivotal role of time (and its disruption) in Design for Social Innovation (DSI), critiquing its prevalent forward-gazing narrative deeply entrenched in a linear model of progress aligned with neoliberal and colonial imaginaries. And yet, at the same time, radical critiques, while effective in challenging dominant discourses and deconstructing current social hegemonies, keep the analysis anchored in the past, creating a space-and-time stalemate of inaction.

Amidst this seemingly irreconcilable temporal tension between the futurist-futuring projection of DSI and the over-backward gaze of critique, I found anarchafeminist perspectives as crucial and long overdue alter-narratives of change. On the one hand, the anarchist component, by advocating for the immediate enactment of future ideals (prefiguration) and repurposing of past elements for contemporary use (constitutionalising), seeks to collapse traditional temporal boundaries in the here-and-now. On the other hand, the contemporary feminist and queer calls to engage with the 'queer time' of performativity and 'stay with the trouble' invites us to reimagine social innovations within novel fluid temporal dimensions and, still, grounded into actionable presents.

Central to this anarchafeminist exploration of DSI theory, which harmonizes the lessons of the past, the urgencies of the present, and the possibilities of the future, is, therefore, the quest for coherent methodological orientations. In this sense, I conclude by advancing the application of games and play as time warp machines, enabling explorations and performances of social change not as a distant ideal or a static critique but as a lived reality co-created in the spirit of anarchafeminist play.

1. Premise: from Research to (Design) Practice to Theory Again

This theoretical reflection is part of a broader exploration of grassroots social innovations through a playful design approach, which evolved almost 'organically' during my ongoing PhD research into London's housing precarity.

The critical quest for a term overcoming the ideologically constructed notion of "housing crisis" (White & Nandedkar, 2021; Klein, 2007) led me to 'precarity,' highlighting the political nature of injustice (Waite, 2009) and gender's overlooked aspect. This political, feminist, and queer perspective guided my inquiry, with Butler's work on precariousness and vulnerability (2004, 2010; Butler et al., 2016) providing a theoretical anchor on the potential of shared conditions of vulnerable uncertainty to unite radical and care-based struggles.

I realized that design for social innovation (DSI), particularly in reclaiming its original subversive and grassroots discourse (Godin, 2012; Srinivas, 2023), could have benefited from inhabiting the uncertain condition of precarity-vulnerability (Zechner & Cobo-Guevara, 2017) to disrupt its 'business-as-usual' and reorient actions and strategies for social change—not just to design a social change that reacts to disruption but rather one that acts through disruption.

This exploration first led me to reflect on my role as a researcher critically. I realized that the traditional academic path to participatory research is too often driven by philanthropic 'good' intentions (Volpi et al., 2024), which unintentionally perpetuated saviour dynamics and corporate-like efficiencies at the expense of genuine horizontal collaboration. As a result, I adopted the explicit feminist, situated, and autoethnographic 'I' (Young, 1997), stepping back from the expert's podium with my design co-participants (and therefore refusing on these pages the impersonal 'objective' voice too), to embrace the vulnerable role of the 'unsure,' —one that I had always tried to conceal in my migrant/gendered academic position where I thought I needed to hide any fragility that could call my rational 'authority' into question.

The deliberate shift towards embracing 'disruption' as a research compass revealed many unquestioned academic practices of embedded epistemic injustice, not only in language but also in methods and timelines that I, as a researcher, was perpetuating. How could I promote new forms of discontinuity instead of reproducing them? I started undoing the 'participatory' design plans I unilaterally made to reconceive a collective methodology with more uncertain, voluntary, and relational dynamics. Surprisingly, this 'ineffective' ongoing turn became a strength rather than a limitation—a change in perspective resonating with the ludic principle of "meaningful inefficiencies": players are given goals and face unnecessary obstacles, and it is precisely those unnecessary obstacles that make their game's efforts meaningful (Gordon & Walter, 2019).

This approach necessitated reconsidering temporal dynamics, too, for a more fluid, co-created process. "As academics, we knew that our lives were structured by time as a vector of power, from minutiae, such as class schedules, through annual reviews and milestones, such as merit steps and promotions, through the larger temporal systems that govern invisibly, which Michel Foucault ([1975] 1995) understood as the heart of discipline and which one of us calls 'chrononormativity' (Freeman 2010)" (Samuels & Freeman 2021, p. 245). Navigating temporal tensions was not just about rethinking how time could be managed in a caring manner, shielding my co-researchers from academic pressure to unambiguously 'manage and finalise' the project, but about reimagining ambiguous time altogether.

Ludic principles permeated our collaboration and evolved into playful projects and then methodologically oriented tools. This enabled us to use time as a canvas for creative exploration of alternative forms of social change and temporal experience. Through this approach, we created spaces to envision future societies, reflect on and revise the past, and deeply engage with the complexities of the present in a participatory manner. This new form of social innovation, rooted in the manipulation of time, allows for a radical and inherent transformation in participatory processes underpinned by anarchafeminist principles.

But an anarchafeminist praxis means not just bringing theory into practice but ‘dragging’ the personal and practical into the theoretical again. “The personal is theoretical. Theory itself is often assumed to be abstract: something is more theoretical, the more abstract it is, the more it is abstracted from everyday life. To abstract is to drag away, detach, pull away, or divert. We might then have to drag theory back, to bring theory back to life” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 9-10).

This short contribution aims, therefore, to open up a discussion in DSI theory and engage with time more deeply.

2. Time and Change: All About the Future

Time is increasingly recognized as a fundamental concept in social sciences, and disability and queer studies (Samuels & Freeman, 2021; Freeman, 2010; Muñoz, 2009) are particularly emphasizing its crucial role in transcending normative and colonial biases to liberate the collective imagination.

"Just as the foundational works of queer theory revealed that gender, sexuality, and race/ethnicity are not natural or inevitable but social and conventional—and hence ethical and political—these time-(dis)oriented works of queer theory demonstrate that even seemingly commonsensical categories such as past, present, and future are no less culturally constructed and no less intimately bound up with the (il)logics of desire and power" (Moore et al., 2018, p.3).

And yet, temporal dimensions in DSI theory are frequently overlooked despite their crucial role in shaping our understanding of social change and its binding relationship with power discourses.

Despite DSI's commendable intentions to address societal challenges while fostering equitable and sustainable community-centered initiatives, current mainstream theoretical directions and applications are increasingly coming under scrutiny. On the one hand, the design thinking approach to social change aims to move beyond current wicked problems towards future transformative solutions urgently, and in this ‘rush’ risks overlooking communities' immediate realities -and informal responses; on the other hand, DSI in the last decade demonstrated a certain susceptibility to neoliberal co-optation and elite capture (Táiwò, 2022), and I argue, here, that this co-optation strongly reflects an insufficient engagement with temporal discussion.

SI's unquestioned tendency towards a linear and progress-oriented view of change is embedded within colonial and northern-Western epistemologies (Tunstall, 2013; 2023) and notions of progress that, by emphasising market-driven solutions, are sidelining more radical, grassroots efforts that operate outside the conventional market logic. More poignantly, despite the approach's focus on the future, it can be argued that SI fictional expectations (Beckert, 2016) are not different from the present, and while “design fictions articulate desires for new futures of the everyday life, (...) their fictional status bring forth desires that bear no accountability in the present” (Gonzatto et al., 2013, p. 36).

In other words, the futures of neoliberal innovators are colonising other forms of creative agency (Ziegler, 2019, p.165) and potential social arrangements proceeding through trials, errors, and vulnerable coalitions, pointing to significant gaps in DSI frameworks: a lack of critical underpinnings that could challenge current power structures and a lack of imagination towards alternative futures beyond the status quo.

In response to these critiques, design futuring emerges as an attempt to infuse DSI with a needed dose of speculative thinking and criticality.

The concept of the future is gaining great academic traction (Andersson, 2018; Beckert, 2016; Beckert & Bronk, 2018; Bryant & Knight, 2019; Urry, 2016; Oomen et al., 2022), rooted in the rich theoretical soil of utopian studies with their focus on ideal societies and transformative visions. Design futuring tries to catch up with philosophical discussions and extend *social innovations* beyond practical solutions to engage with the realm of the possible by drawing on utopian *anticipation* (Wagner-Lawlor, 2017) and leveraging its visionary scope to inspire radical innovations that are both speculative and actionable; yet, this future-only orientation also encapsulates the crux of the challenge. Both DSI and a certain brand of speculative-

utopian blueprints that leaves no room for the messy, iterative processes of real-world change tend to privilege ideal novelty over proven informal methods, thus still prioritise future outcomes at the expense of present imperfect realities, and still “need greater plurality” (Howell et al., 2021).

In sum, while the future-directed trajectories of DSI, design futuring, and utopian studies offer powerful frameworks for imagining and striving towards better societies, they also underscore the need for a balanced engagement with time, recognizing that meaningful social innovation must weave together and problematise the threads of past experiences to create a tapestry of change that is both visionary and critically grounded.

3. Stuck in the Past

In examining social change, dissecting it through the complex layers of history that have shaped our current societal conditions, and putting the ideological construction of alternatives in power and discursive contexts, critical methodologies such as genealogy offer incredibly deep insights.

Genealogy, as developed by Foucault (1977), serves, in fact, as an invaluable tool for excavating the origins and transformations of social practices and power dynamics. By tracing the historical lineage of present-day realities, genealogy uncovers the contingent and often arbitrary nature of what we take for granted as 'natural' or immutable, but it would be wrong to think about genealogies as mere historical analysis; rather their “intent is to problematize the present by revealing the power relations upon which it depends and the contingent processes that have brought it into being” (Garland, 2014, p.372) and contextualize social changes within a broader evolution of the ideological framework.

Yet, while genealogy and other critical discourse analyses excel in deconstructing historical and narrative social change, they may lack a *constructive* dimension and thus lead to a state of paralysis where design hesitates to commit to concrete, actionable social innovations.

To foster meaningful innovation, I believe it is key to move beyond a retrospective limbo of perpetual critique as much as a futurist forward-gazing discourse and rather leverage novel approaches that not only dissect the past and inspire the future but crucially engage with the uncertain present.

4. Here-and-Now: Anarchism and Feminism Collapsing Time

To move beyond future-focused visions or past-static critiques, I often question why design overlooks anarchism (Graeber, 2004) and why DSI, in particular, ignores anarchafeminist valuable insights. The synthesis of anarchism's commitment to dismantling interlocking hierarchies and feminism's focus on gender and social justice that “practices what anarchism preaches” (Tanenbaum, 2016, p.13; Bottici, 2022) offers a unique perspective to approach and understand social change in a new temporal and profoundly agentic dimension.

Anarchism's relation with the past, through processes of anarchist *constitutionalising* (Kinna et al. 2019a; 2019b), revisits and repurposes historical elements to better fit contemporary contexts and activists' networks. But it is not just the past to pass through the lens of temporal disruption: it is the future, too. The concept of *prefiguration* (Boggs, 1977; Maeckelbergh, 2011) posits that the future we strive for cannot be a distant horizon but must be enacted in the present, embodying the changes we wish to see. This means rejecting the notion that power can be granted by “enlightened experts” (Long & Villareal, 1993, p.160) while maintaining the same asymmetrical power dynamics (Boje & Rosile, 2001; Gruber & Trickett, 1987) and instead directly committing to being the change. Prefiguration, in other words, does not await a perfect future, designed and implemented by experts and representatives; rather, it creates spaces for present-day horizontal decision-making processes and living experiments of alternative social orders where failure and trial are also embraced as part of the process (Antebi et al. 2007).

Prefiguration thus becomes a method of "collapsing the future into the present" (Swain 2019, p. 55), offering a direct challenge to the status quo by integrating critiques from the past and future ideals into the fabric of current action.

The idea that the future is real "to the extent that it is performed" in the present (Butler, 1988, p. 527) has a significant impact on contemporary feminist thought as well. *Performativity* (Butler, 1990), which emphasizes the importance of social actors' performances "of the future which have an effect on others' actions in the present" (Tutton, 2017, p. 483) can be seen as another form of praxis that corrects historical biases (e.g. Edelman, 1985) by the enactment (Burke, 1969; Ezrahi, 2012) of a queer time that disrupts and reconfigures the future (Halberstam, 2005; Arruzza, 2015). This aligns with anarchism, which asserts that we can challenge normative temporalities and social orders through conscious acts of defiance and prefiguration. At the same time, enacting alternative social relations and structures in the here and now, demonstrating a direct engagement with the complexities and urgencies of the present moment, and avoiding the pitfalls of deferring change to a distant future resonates in Haraway's notion of *staying with the trouble* (2016).

An increasing number of critical texts argue that design has an ideological impact and shapes society (Dunne & Raby, 2013). Anarchafeminist's contribution to DSI lies in this debate, rejecting solutionist thinking, positivist universal ontologies, and Northern-Western epistemologies, and rather opting for "trouble, situated knowledges and intimate futures [which] (...) cannot and should not be captured" (Sondergaard, 2018). In some ways, anarchafeminist temporal disruptions already reflect Erlhoff and Rezaï's idea that design must "never yield to stability, but rather to indulge in the intersections of incongruities, uncertainties, and complexities" (2021).

The questions that I am trying to answer are, therefore, how (design) research can thrive in the uncertain, and which interactive design medium can serve as a sandbox for experimenting with the principles of anarchafeminist DSI?

5. Conclusion: Playful Time Warp Machines for DSI?

My research is currently exploring games as novel, playful arenas where the anarchafeminist collapsing of time is not only possible but inherent.

Design literature already recognizes the potential of games to envision democratic scenarios, renegotiate power dynamics, and foster collaboration (Brandt & Messeter, 2004; Eriksen et al., 2014; Khaled & Vasalou, 2014; Brandt, 2006), and games are also increasingly being explored as catalyzers of social innovations (Bayrak, 2019; Gomes et al., 2021; Swain, 2007). However, I believe that games' main strength lies in their ability to offer a unique medium for critiquing, exploring, and reimagining social realities within fluid temporal dimensions.

Time is a tool that can be manipulated by game designers (Tychsen & Hitchens, 2009), and yet, designers are not the only agents involved in temporality. Indeed, game temporalities, as mechanisms of organizing time within games, are intricately formed through the ongoing performance of routinized behaviours, mutual expectations, and norms shaped by players' actions and agency (Rapp, 2019; Nguyen, 2020).

This dynamic interplay highlights how games can offer diverse ways to experience and manipulate time, emphasizing the role of both designers and players in continuously shaping and disrupting temporal planes, thus offering a practical application of anarchafeminist principles in DSI that challenge the linear progression of time and encourages a more holistic and democratic understanding of social change.

I am presently collaborating with East London housing activists to design together a political board game about the London Olympic Legacy that not only serves as a cultural, entertaining, and socialising medium but as a time warp machine. The participatory game design phase allows us to reflect and rewrite the betrayal of Olympic Legacy promises (Wainwright, 2022) to disrupt the past; its cooperative play phase

provides an opportunity to practice alternative solutions to the current dehumanizing and alienating housing and social cleansing issues. Lastly, the iterative playtesting phase continuously (re)shapes future-oriented practices of rule-bending, broadens the participatory spectrum, and disrupts dominant fictional expectations through grassroots actionable knowledge production (Boje et al., 2004, p. 1).

The dynamic nature of play and games is thus a poly-vocal *ante-narrative*: a “fragmented, non-linear, incoherent, collective, unplotted, and improper storytelling” (Boje, 2011, p. 1) that bridges the “static dominant narrative of the past with the dynamic ‘lived story’ of the present to enable reflective (past-oriented) and prospective (future-oriented) sense-making” (Boje, 2008, pp. 6-13; Jones et al., 2016).

As I have explored the intersection of temporality, social innovation, and radical critique through an anarchafeminist lens, advocating for a deeper engagement with time in the design and implementation of social innovations, I hope to continue to further investigate how games and play can operationalize anarchafeminist principles, and I look forward to witnessing these principles being applied by other researchers in a variety of design contexts, such as evaluating their ‘impact’ on community involvement, self-empowerment, and the creation of just and sustainable social realities.

As we continue to navigate the complexities of social change, the playful exploration of time offers a promising path toward more inclusive and transformative social innovations. And, after all, to paraphrase a famous Italian pun¹, the problems are wicked but not serious.

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¹ “In Italy the political situation is grave, but it is not serious” wrote Ennio Flaiano in 1956 in his *Night Diary*.

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