



“DON'T SAY BUT, SHAKE YOUR BUTT!”

FARES BOU NASSIF

I HADN'T BEEN TO A CONFERENCE BY MISTAKE LIKE PICNIC BEFORE.

The Thursday before it started, I was walking around the city, in the evening, and randomly walked into an office on one of the canals because I was curious to know what they did. Conversation, and “there’s this festival on Monday, called Picnic; check it out,” so I did. Now here’s me thinking “oh, this’ll be relaxed and easy fun,” completely oblivious to what it was. I mean, it’s a festival, right?

Well, I got there, and as I wrote in my blog: initially, going into Picnic, I was not exactly sure what to expect.

Openness and sustainability had become words that bored me, polished terms that do not reflect the ethos of the hacker culture I grew up believing in. In my earlier years, as a computer science and software engineering major at university, hacking was a touchpoint in everything I did; open source, the free software foundation, et al, were my best pals. Eventually, I’d moved on and away, although I am very much still attached to the fundamental principles of these movements. Which is why, walking into Picnic, unprepared, I was very pleasantly surprised.



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Sustainism & Other Day One Stories

Yes, Dutch Open Design and its adjoining themes are lacking, but Picnic 2012 does bring together several key elements that are unavoidably interesting. As Michiel Schwarz describes his concept of Sustainism, the three values of both his idea and, potentially, Picnic 2012 are simple: “Connectedness, Localism, and Sharing.” In fact, this theory of Sustainism was one of the more catchy of the first day, defining a post-postmodernist era as being centred around collaboration, advanced channels of communication, and the desire of the masses to improve their quality of life in harmony with the limitations of the planet, in consideration and through the inclusion of other cultures and people, and the overall fundamental principles of hackers, green engineers, homeopaths, sustainist designers, activists of various affiliations, and, yes, even hippies.

The idea of being together and working together for a common betterment seems central to this post-postmodernist view that Schwarz ‘preached’ and termed Sustainism. It’s not really his idea though, it’s simply an empirical observation of our surroundings, one that seems very reasonable and definitely appealing. One quote sums it up nicely, smoothly: “a habitat of mutual relationships from ‘you are what you have’ to ‘you are what you share’”.

Putting it all together in a more humanitarian context was Anne

Shongwe’s Empowering Bottom Up, where the founder and CEO of Afroes, her digital solutions firm for Africa “rooted in Africa’s rich heritage”, gives us a whole new image of Africa and its youth, reminding us that it’s a continent that has vast economic and natural resources, with a population of 900 million. She talks of the many initiatives they have started, using gaming and storytelling on mobile devices through apps to allow children to learn. And those kids? They carry SIM cards and wait until they run into someone with a phone so they can take it over for half an hour and play!

Where there was no discussion on hacking, it was on apps and how they can be used in an open, shared, connected ecosystem that would improve your life. In a sense, the feel of the whole thing was very much in line with Byron Reese’s talk about ‘The Great Disconnect’, and how we have become untethered. Untethered: “we’re not born into a role that you spend your entire life playing, instead you decide who you are.” We have choices, we have the choice not to make choices. We can change everything, simply because we’re no longer shackled by other people’s expectations. Again, another realm of openness: open-mindedness through self-determination.



Photo credit: Jonne Seijdel



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Bas van Abel & FairPhones

A few months before Picnic, I was involved in research on the theme of ‘openness’ in Dutch design and Dutch design organisations. The primary candidates of our investigations were de Waag Society, Droog, and Premsele (as one does when dealing with Dutch design), but there was, more specifically, one name that was more or less involved at every level: Bas van Abel. He was behind quite a bit of the work, particularly the Open Design Now book. At the time, I didn’t meet him as one of my colleagues interviewed him instead.

So, seeing him speak the first day at Picnic, I was a little bit skeptical. He was going on about FairPhones and it did feel a little bit plastic, a little like a child’s

toy project — until the story developed and my prejudices faded. His idea was simple, and his anecdote quite entertaining: his kid had damaged his Nintendo DS and when he tried to fix it, he found out that it was an extremely closed system. This got him to wonder about Apple products (since his electronic ecosystem is practically governed by Apple), and the iPhone, which ultimately produced the idea of the FairPhone. Some fraction of it was on display outside the EYE, and the whole affair seemed a little like it was still a concept, like he was pitching to get funding, but it did, realistically, make sense: smartphones produced in Africa and elsewhere that give everyone involved in the production chain, down to the raw materials miners,

fair treatment and fair pay. If nothing more, an honourable venture that actually has the potential to grow or affect change.

Taken down to its core, this philosophy of sharing and co-creation, of equality in production, and the festival as a whole gives new life to de Waag’s consistent marketing of open design as a future to be considered and contended with, to how Droog Design disappointed with its Design for Download project, and to the many criticisms one can level at the different approaches that have been considered by larger institutions ‘crashing’ hackerspaces and DIY projects in an effort to expose them as a new trend, and a valuable one at that. At least the intentions were there.



Photo credit: Jonne Seijdel



Cathal Garvey

Besides these two wonderful talks near the end, there was that half hour I spent in Cinema 3 waiting for Schwarz’s half hour, attending the ‘Why DIY? Biotech in the Backyard’ talk. I know nothing about biology past what I need to get by on a daily basis. Never really had an interest in it, although I can imagine what biotech would look like based on sci-fi novels and films (yes, nothing like the real thing). Still, there was something remarkable about seeing a guy who looked like he couldn’t be a day over 21 telling a room full of people about the bio-hackerspaces he’s been trying to establish and the lab he’d set up in his mom’s backyard. Cathal Garvey is a young man whose pure energy and devotion to biohacking and the hacker community at large makes you

want to join his cause. After that first session, he popped by for his second, longer, talk between Elizabeth Stark and Tim O’Reilly’s talks, and that was when we really got to hear what he had to say.

Now, very few people are ever going to pretend they understood everything he was trying to explain to us during that second session, where he went on about the different tools and equipment he’d hacked into existence and how easily he could do something strange to polio, but what he did offer, and the reason why I find him to have been one of the more inspirational people at Picnic this year, is a look into how much design thinking, the designer ethos, and hackers have in common — and how transferable their processes and ideals are to

completely unrelated disciplines.

Then, he wrapped it up with one of his numerous side notes, he gave us a whole new look at academia. In talking about a recent anti-Elsevier boycott by researchers and academics worldwide, he pointed out that “opening up research papers is actually the most effective way of sharing knowledge,” which is possibly one of the most obvious well-hidden truths I’ve ever considered. When you’re not part of a university somewhere, there is a gigantic body of knowledge that you do not have access to simply because you cannot (or will not) pay hundreds of euros for access. Open source knowledge should have, really, been the first thing any hacker fought for, no?



Photo credit: Jonne Seijdel





The Exhibits

Before those, there were the exhibits, with people like AngelClique developing a platform that crowdsources talent for projects; Lev Kaupas giving workshops on ownership, technology, sustainability, and others; try not shopping for a year? - Emma Ojala did - from November 2010, she found the experience to be very relaxing, and talked about it on FreeFashionChallenge.com; Laura de Jong is starting the Dear Fashion magazine, about living with fashion and exploring different ways to do so; Solar Fiber producing solar panels hidden in different wearable materials; 7scenes giving gaming a whole new meaning and engagement to the masses and the young with their game design and education platform; Marieka Ratsma developed 3D printed high heel inspired by human bone aesthetic. The list is endless.



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Tim O'Reilly: "Create More Value Than You Capture"



The idea is about what you create for the world. Tim O'Reilly is a technological celebrity, an educator, investor, enabler, and publisher. He works towards improving our understanding of technology and giving access to new technologies.

At Picnic, his focus was on giving back to everyone around us. In his historical overview of how technology is founded on the 'giving away' of information by people like Linus Torvalds and GNU and Eric Raymond and Steve Wozniak, of how Microsoft used to create value and then began to drop away from that in the mid-nineties, of how Wall Street used to help people and now competes against them.

Throughout his talk, quotes from others before him peppered his argument, making the whole thing feel like an enjoyably improvised academic paper. Clearly a man full of knowledge, his ultimate statement on the clothesline paradox and its analogous open source movement and its monetisation. He reminds us that everything we have today, everything on the Internet and on our devices, is built on the open source movements, until he finally started talking about Internet service providers.

We pay for our Internet connection just like we pay for television, but we still refer to our content on the Internet "for free" while we do not think that of television channels. Google makes its money off of advertising, but offers its content for free (so that people access it, creating a high degree of advertising

income for the company). What O'Reilly points out is a small detail at the bottom right of YouTube videos pertaining to the licensing of content by Google for the users of YouTube. How? Google auto-detects whatever content is being used without license and pays the entity that owns the rights to it a certain royalty fee so as to keep the content live. For example, Lady Gaga (who O'Reilly does not name directly) makes more money from users embedding her music in their fan-generated videos, through Google, than she does from posting her own videos. His examples go on to explain how the movie industry makes more from illegally uploaded trailers and videos than it does from their video rentals, and generating a whole new income stream and monetary economy.

His whole talk, from this point on, paid especial attention not only to the assimilation of YouTube into everything we do online, but also to Kickstarter, to Couchsurfing.com, Etsy, and others: the concept of creating value through sharing. And, to close, he reminded us of Eric Raymond's The Cathedral and the Bazaar and Lewis Hyde's The Gift, where the idea of gifting as a means to improve one's standing is promulgated, and Steve Jobs telling the Stanford graduates that: "Life can be much broader once you discover one simple fact. And that is everything around you that you call life was made up by people who were no smarter than you. And you can change it. You can influence it. You can build your own things that other people can use."

Photo credit: Janne Seifdel



Wrap Up

One person tweeted: "Reviewing is the new advertising." Another, reminding us yet again that the future is programmed: "In Estonia, all first graders learn how to code. So who's winning the brain race..? Smart!"

SOPA as bottom-up democratisation
But if there's an error, it spreads widely. RT @fbnas: Elizabeth Stark /P2P learning replaces expert-teaching?
@up_tanja / so then maybe monitored, mentored P2P?

Interesting talk by Andy Hood about how accommodating failure might be the best route to success in times of innovation turnbull: everyone is born an entrepreneur. Not everybody starts their own business. The rest can and should be intrapreneurs.
AndradaMorar: Key learning so far @ #picnic12: Take (major) risks. If you fail, even better. Because you learn. And learning means success. Makes sense?
Me: AndradaMorar Although I'd add a second key learning: take initiatives that matter, share, and then it's okay if you fail.
Gianni Catalfamo: AndradaMorar totally.
At #picnic12 seeing some freaky live demos of DIY neuroscience by <http://www.backyardbrains.com>



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