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Briscoe, G; Hon, JX

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# Choreograthons: Hackathons for Dance Composition

Gerard Briscoe
Queen Mary University London

Jia Xuan Hon
Blackwinged Creatives

**Executive Summary**

In exploring the potential of Culture Hacks for knowledge exchange between arts and humanities research and the digital creative industries of the creative economy, we came to consider the wider applicability of hackathon model. Both, to confirm the feasibility of the model for knowledge exchange, and to understand its usefulness to other domains. This included considering its applicability to the performing arts, including choreography for which there emerged a congruence with the working practices of independent choreographers. So, we adapted the hackathon model for choreography, proposing a model for choreograthons and discussing its potential applicability. Including, how it could address some of the challenges faced by independent choreographers. We conclude by considering the applicability the hackathon model to the wider performing arts and knowledge exchange.

## 1 Introduction

A hackathon has been described as a problem-focused computer programming event [Topi 2014], as well as a contest to pitch, programme, and present instances of prototype digital innovation (e.g. a prototype mobile application) [Leckart 2012]. Culture Hacks are hackathons focused on arts and culture for the creation of innovative digital prototypes by creating new collaborations across the arts, technology and the creative industries. We considered the potential use of the hackathon model in arts and humanities research, and the wider arts and humanities, beyond Culture Hacks for knowledge exchange to the digital creative industries. The model could prove useful to specific subjects in the arts and humanities. It could also provide a reference point supporting Culture Hacks for knowledge exchange, becoming a viable model for innovation in both areas. Hackathons have a history of use in academia, mostly within the sciences and engineering (e.g. [Lapp 2007]), suggesting that it could be applicable to the arts and humanities. Also, there is a strong tradition of academics within some disciplines of the arts and humanities also being practitioners, who divide their time between applied professional practice and their research. So, this could be helpful as hackathons, especially Culture Hacks, have some history of including practitioners of the arts [Briscoe 2014b].

We then came to consider adapting the hackathon model for choreography specifically. We considered that the typical creative process for independent choreographers forces them to undesirably promise artistic liability and to undertake non-artistic responsibilities. The later actually making the risk in the first greater than needs be. The first arrises as their creative process typically follows the process of [Lavender 2008]: find collaborators; creation with collaborators; share work-in-progress (i.e. sketches) to mentors or a small audience for feedback; performance(s). Within this fragile process [Lavender 2008] funding also has to be sought.

The next section will introduce the hackathon model, and then the subsequent section will propose adaptations of the hackathon model for choreography. We will then consider the applicability of adapting the hackathon model to the wider performing arts in the conclusion.

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## 2 Hackathons

Innovation with digital technologies continues to emerge, but increasingly there are efforts to help nurture such innovation through hackathons [Briscoe 2014a, 2014b]. The word *hackathon* is combined from the words *hack* and *marathon*, where *hack* is used in the sense of exploratory and investigate programming (not as a reference to committing a cybercrime). So, hackathons bring together programmers and others to collaborate intensively over a short period of time on software prototypes [Topi 2014]. These hackathons are encouraging of experimentation and creativity, and can be challenge orientated. The current model of hackathons for digital creative communities of practice has become a mainstream concept within the cultures of the digital economy, leading to a global hackathon phenomenon [Briscoe 2014b]. Emerging as an effective approach to encouraging innovation with digital technologies in a large range of different spaces (music, open data, fashion, academia, and more).

Hackathons typically start with one or more presentations about the event, including the challenge prizes if available. Aims or challenges can be gathered beforehand, or they can generated at the event, or the event may be focused around a specific task. Data sources are then often made available to the participants, sometimes exclusively for the event by the hosts and/or sponsors. Then participants suggest ideas and form small teams, based on individual interests and skills. While hosts provide space for the event and basic equipment in the form of furniture (table, chairs, etc), participants typically bring their own technical equipment (laptops, tablets, etc). Sometimes, hardware prototyping equipment can be provided by the hosts (e.g. Arduino[1]). Sometimes participants will pitch their ideas to recruit additional team members, because without sufficient technologists paper prototypes have to be utilised. Then the main work of the hackathon begins, which can last anywhere from several hours to several days. However, they typically last between a day and a week in length. For hackathons that last 24 hours or longer, especially competitive ones, eating is often informal. Sometimes sleeping is informal as well, with participants sleeping on-site with sleeping bags, or in provided tents at larger events. At the end of hackathons, there is usually a series of demonstrations in which each group presents their results. [Briscoe 2014a, 2014b]

## 3. Choreograthons

Adapting the hackathon model to choreography requires using the principles which hackathons have demonstrated [Jordan 2012] to be successful, but for innovation within dance composition rather than digital innovation (i.e. innovation with digital technologies). So, we propose that choreograthons would be focused around a specific task, like some hackathons, that of developing new dance compositions.

Participants would be choreographers and dancers, and perhaps potential audience (consumers), rather than computer programmers and others concerned with software development. Dance composition sketches would be equivalent to *data sources* that are often made available at the start of hackathons. While participants of hackathons typically bring their own equipment (laptops, tablets, etc), participants of choreograthons would bring their skills (dance, dance composition, etc). We propose that events would take the form of weekend events for participant availability, and range between 24 to 48 hours to provide sufficient time to intensively develop dance compositions, similar to many hackathons. Hosts would similarly provide space for the event, but more space would be required *per head* than with hackathons, because of the need to support exploring dance composition. Also, basic equipment such as furniture (table, chairs, etc) would be different, requiring less tables for more floor space. Informal sleeping and eating, similar to hackathons, would be permitted were practical.

Choreograthons, like hackathons, would also start with presentations about the event, including the challenge prizes if available. However, the content of some of the the presentations would be different. For example, sketches for new dance compositions, instead of data sources or new

Application Programming Interfaces. Also, this would be similar to when some participants at hackathons, at or near the start, *pitch* their ideas to recruit (additional) team members. So, the sketches once presented would be worked on intensively and collaboratively by the participants, organised in small groups typical to hackathons. The evolved sketches would then be presented at the end of the event, akin to the demonstration of prototypes at the end of many hackathons.

Our proposed choreograthon model would be unique within existing creative activities for innovative dance composition [Smith-Autard 2010]. Events would to be purposefully disruptive and playful, allowing choreographers to receive practical intervention and fresh perspectives. Therefore, encouraging new artistic connections and allowing choreographers to test innovative ideas without burden (space, expert eyes, audience, etc). So, it could potentially remove several barriers for independent choreographers when creating new work, especially for emerging choreographers who struggle even more for access to resources. For example, participant choreographers would be able to access talent from other artistic disciplines (e.g. dancers), testing collaborative partnerships and ideas with almost no liabilities. Furthermore, increasing the opportunities of being able to create (and dispose) more frequently (and easily). Both of which are considered to be key elements for creativity amongst artists [Jarvie 1986]. There is also potential to bring back some playfulness to the activities of dance composition, which is also a key element for creativity [Lieberman 1977].

## 4 Conclusion

We have proposed a new model of choreography based upon the *hackathon phenomenon* [Briscoe 2014b], so contributing a new conceptualisation for creative communities of practice from an emerging digital culture. Therefore, abstracting an instance of emerging digital culture beyond digital technologies, with potential to transform creative communities of practice across a range of the performing arts. This is because, as with independent choreographers in the development of dance composition, it can help to address concerns and challenges faced by practitioners.

The proposed models also provides a reference point for its use within creative communities, supporting the potential of Culture Hacks for knowledge exchange, by being a model for innovation in the arts and humanities (research) and the digital creatives industries.

Future work should include critically evaluating a pilot event, especially with regards to reproducibility and dependencies (facilitator, environment, etc). So, ensuring a relative ease of hosting such events for commercialisability of the model, akin to hacakthons. Future work should also consider the applicability of adapting the hackathon model for the wider performing arts, determining if it could also help to address their concerns and challenges.

## Acknowledgements

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