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I first met Anita at the IRIS conference at Åre in 2008, where we were both given “best paper” awards for our writings about information systems challenges from a systems perspective. Despite my personal enthusiasm for systems thinking, I had not met too many fellow IS researchers building on this scholarly tradition, so I was encouraged by the way Anita presented her research on the use of soft systems methodology in a library context in an inspirational manner. We then met at the 2009 UK Systems Society conference in Oxford. This time we were able to spend more time together, discussing systems theory and the current state of systems research. Not only Anita’s knowledge but also her pleasant personality had an important impact me. So, when I was ready to defend my PhD in 2013, I was very happy when it was announced that Anita would be part of my dissertation evaluation committee. During the defence she was helpful in pointing her opposition in ways that allowed to me to go into detail about political and theoretical aspects of my research that were close to my heart and enjoyable to talk about.
Systems, technology and politics

The first of two comments I remember particularly well from Anita’s opposition at my PhD defence had to do with how I was doing action research on total quality management (TQM) through the use of critical systems thinking (CST), referring to Adorno and Marcuse on one hand, and appearing to be doing management’s bidding on the other. Was I not a part of the oppressive regime that I wanted to liberate people from? Anita’s question was an invitation to talk about technology in society. Similar to how the Norwegian state acts as a third player in conflicts between labour and management, some of us would argue that technology plays a similar role when management and labour negotiate the introduction of something like TQM. Although I admire Kristen Nygaard’s work on coalition building for workers control of technology, a premise for rendering the work meaningful was the belief that technology is generally controlled by management. Today, as technology is more complex and ubiquitous, it is not as obvious who controls technology or whether technology can be controlled. When implementing TQM as means for making a complex organisation more efficient by making it more transparent, it may not necessarily be the workers who most fear their authority being challenged by transparency. In my analysis the main interface in the TQM implementation conflict is not management/workforce or designer/user but rather designer/management. Implementing TQM through the perspective of CST may thus be a way of disclosing manipulation and fighting injustice.

Anita’s second comment had to do with my use of game theory for analysing this designer/owner conflict. Building on Jon Elster’s suggestion that Marxist analysis and critical theory in general should be articulated through game theory, I looked at different types of games for analysing interactions that need to be understood when implementing TQM, including classical game theory models like Matching Pennies and Stag Hunt and parlour games like Monopoly. However, what triggered Anita was the use of the Pac-Man video game for articulating the ongoing conflict between TQM implementation and TQM ownership. Using the Pac-Man model to narrate my 20 years of personal experience with TQM implementation in the public sector, the narrative became a story about the little yellow Pac-Man character being chased by managerial monsters through a closed labyrinth while trying to survive by means of political activism. Like most popular video games developed in the early 1980s, Pac-Man is easy to understand but difficult to master, which was a point I wanted to make about CST-driven TQM as political activism.

Not only were these two comments useful for being allowed to elaborate on issues I felt strongly about, they also gave me the opportunity to compare my research with Anita’s study of the soft systems methodology (SSM) within the Arvidsjaur community. A common aspect here, as seen from my perspective, is the beauty of systems thinking as means for understanding and aiding political activism by use of what I will broadly describe as mathematical models and scientific methods.