Ethnography

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Ethnogging the nog
Get out of the lab!

- We want to look at techniques where you get out of the lab and see things in context

- What if you were wanting to design a document management system…
Observation
What is ethnography

- Not so much a methodology as a way of thinking
- Adapted from sociology and anthropology
  - “Method of observing human interactions in social settings and activities”
  - “observing people in a cultural context” where a culture is “made up of certain values, practices, relationships and identifications.”
    - More on this later
Why bother?

- An ethnographic study is a powerful assessment of users' needs
- It uncovers the true nature of the system user's job
- The ethnographer can play the role of the end-user
- The open-ended and unbiased nature of ethnography allows for discovery
- You always learn ‘something’
And the catch...?

- Time requirements
- Presentation of results
- Scale
Doing the stuff?

- Usually observationally based
- Cultural immersion is beneficial
  - Critical action research very popular at UCT
  - Cultural immersion rated highly by sociologists and anthropologists
- Can be virtual – much work on multi-player games
What do you get?

- Mostly qualitative data
  - Bit of a shock for ‘hard’ scientists
  - "Three households reported using chat between the PC and the tablet. One example of this is interesting because it illustrates a creative simultaneous use of the PC and the tablet to accomplish a task. From the tracking data, we noticed that one household was simultaneously looking at the same web site on both the tablet and the PC while using chat. When we asked what was going on, it turned out that two household members were looking at www.realtor.com together to find a house to buy. Even though their PC was located in the dining area adjoining their living room and they were only feet away from each other, they were using chat to send each other URLs to look at. At the same time, they were vocally discussing the items they were viewing."
Different flavours

- **Concurrent Ethnography**
  - ethnomethodology
- **Preliminary stage of design**
  - Aimed at evaluating and refining a prototype
- **Advantage**
  - Ensures user focus at all stages
- **Disadvantage**
  - Huge coordination nightmare between designers, users, observers etc.
Evaluative Ethnography

- Real world ‘Sanity check’ for design proposal
- Advantage
  - It is useful in helping to quickly prove or disprove a new design model or theory
- Disadvantage
  - The tight focus can blind the ethnographer to important information that is outside the domain of the study.
‘Quick and Dirty’

- Really for gaining a perspective on the problem
- Applies to a wide context or organisation

**Advantage**
- It can quickly yield valuable knowledge of the social organization within a work setting

**Disadvantage**

The results are limited to a general understanding of a work culture (may be wrong)
Hard to convey results to designer
Common Elements

- **Preparation**
  - Understand organization policies and work culture.
  - Familiarize yourself with the system and its history.
  - Set initial goals and prepare questions.
  - Gain access and permission to observe/interview.

- **Set Focus**
  - Explicitly articulated amongst team…
  - …to stop endless speculation

- **Set initial hypotheses**
  - Need something that is ‘testable’
Field Study

- Identify users
- Establish rapport with managers and users.
- Observe/interview users in their workplace and collect subjective/objective quantitative/qualitative data.
- Follow any leads that emerge from the visits.
- Record your visits.
Analysis

- Compile the collected data in numerical, textual, and multimedia databases.
- Quantify data and compile statistics.
- Reduce and interpret the data.
- Refine the goals and the process used.
Reporting

➢ Consider multiple audiences and goals.
➢ Prepare a report and present the findings

➢ Recommend
  - Use ethnographic methods early in the design process
  - Have a well-defined scope
  - Choose a proper level of ethnographic study
  - Make use of previous ethnographic studies
  - Wear one hat at a time
Popular Ethnography

- **Naturalistic Observation**
  - What are they doing!
  - Observing unobtrusively

- **Contextual Inquiry**
  - What are you doing!
  - ‘Partnership’ for discovery (rapport essential)

- **Artefact Walkthrough**
  - What have you done!
  - Examining how tools are used to produce final artefacts
Harder than it sounds

- Ambiguous data
- Time pressure
- Assumptions
- Hard to be a novice
- Hard to set aside preconceptions