

Feedback assignment 4

- Some of you got some new insight into topics you are interested in – that's great!
 - Do you remember informed consent?
 - Anonymize experts?
 - Mosaic effect
 - Present/convey the interview
 - “Steer back to the topics”- how much control?
 - What does an expert tell you?
 - Expert in what?
 - Language is important for communicating
 - Generalising
 - Taking notes
 - Pros and cons of interviewing a friend
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- Now that the exam is approaching: We prefer that you use the time after the lectures on Tuesday to ask questions
 - Exam: 31.05, 01.06 and 02.06
 - 25 minutes per person

Ethnography

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Hanne Cecilie Geirbo

Characteristics of ethnography

- Study of social practices and interactions as they unfold in everyday life
 - Naturally occurring settings
- Ethnographers immerse themselves in the world / lives of the people they study
 - Participant observation
 - Understanding the informants' point of view
 - Descriptive rather than prescriptive
- Cultural relativism
 - Understanding systems of meaning on their own premises
 - Not the same as moral relativism



History of ethnography in design of IS

- Ethnography has its origin in anthropology
 - Comparative study of people in groups, in all its diversity
 - Long-term studies conducted by researchers living in the communities being studied
- Ethnography emerged in design of IS in the 1980ies
 - Connected to a shift in focus from view that technology supports individual tasks to
 - view that human activities largely done in collaboration with others
- Associated with CSCW
- Ethnography in design:
 - exploring systems and artifacts in context
 - focus on practice
 - attend to what people do rather than only what they say they do



Epistemology – assumptions about knowledge in ethnography

- Co-construction of knowledge
 - Data is not “out there”, to be uncovered by the researcher
 - Data is generated, or produced, in interaction with informants
- Knowing through participation
 - Immersion – all senses
 - Eliciting tacit knowledge
 - What is said vs. what is done
- An analytic endeavor
 - Ongoing reflection on one’s participation
 - Ongoing engagement with social science theory



Participant observation

- Participant observation is the main method in ethnography
 - May be supplied by interviews, document analysis, filmic approaches
 - Field notes are central
- Participation and observation
 - Trying to gain the insiders' perspective, and stepping aside to reflect as an outsider
- Especially challenging when studying something familiar
 - Ex. Ethnography in one's own organization
 - Trying to be a "methodological stranger"
- Gaining access to the field
 - Coming across as an agreeable person
 - Apprenticeship
 - Giving something in return – being a conversation partner, providing feedback, helping with something practical



A commitment to be open to the unexpected

- Serendipity (Norw.: å finne noe tilfeldig) – embracing surprises
- In ethnographic fieldwork: “you never know what you will find, or what will find you” (Ferguson 1990, p. 8).
 - Be prepared to change your research plans
 - Be prepared to modify your research question
- Use tension and trouble as source of information
- Problems of access can be a nuisance, but also highly informative
 - Who controls access? How do they control it?
- You cannot always choose your roles
 - Chosen roles and ascribed roles
 - Work with the role you get



Ferguson, J. (1990). *Expectations of modernity: Myths and meanings of urban life on the Zambian Copperbelt.*

Positionality, intersubjectivity, reflexivity

- **The researcher herself is a data generating tool**
 - Immersion with all senses in the field
 - Intersubjectivity – knowledge generated through interaction with informants
 - Researcher’s personality, skills, gender, age, cultural background, class, etc. etc. will influence her access, and her interpretations of what she encounters in the field
- **Reflexivity is crucial**
 - How may my background influence my access to the field and the relations I form in the field?
 - How may my background influence what I see? How I interpret what I see?
 - Making this clear to the readers so they can know how knowledge is produced in this research project

“Research on social relations is made out of social relations, and these are as much created as they are found through the research process” (Crang and Cook 2007, p. 59).

Ethnography in information system studies

- Exploring information systems in use
- Studying work practices
 - Not only how work is done, but which problems occur and how they are solved
- Infrastructural inversion and invisible work (Star 1999)
 - When we talk about what we do, we erase much of it
 - People and their work can also be made invisible in information systems/infrastructures
 - Repair and maintenance – essential work, but often invisible (Monahan 2008)
- Contribution to design
 - Giving designers insight into practices of potential users
 - Getting insights that people have trouble articulating



Ethnography in WoW – an example

- Nardi and Harris (2006): “Strangers and friends: Collaborative play in world of warcraft”
- Ethnographic fieldwork in WoW
 - Participant observation in the game (as characters)
 - Interviews with players
- Exploring what people do in WoW
 - Structured collaborations – guilds, battlegrounds, trades...
 - Less structured collaborations – using game resources in unexpected ways
 - Random acts of fun, misbehaving and social sanctions
- Discussion/argument
 - Positioning against a studies of WoW arguing that there is little social interaction among players
 - Most in-game social interaction not visible through metrics



Illustration from Nardi and Harris (2006)

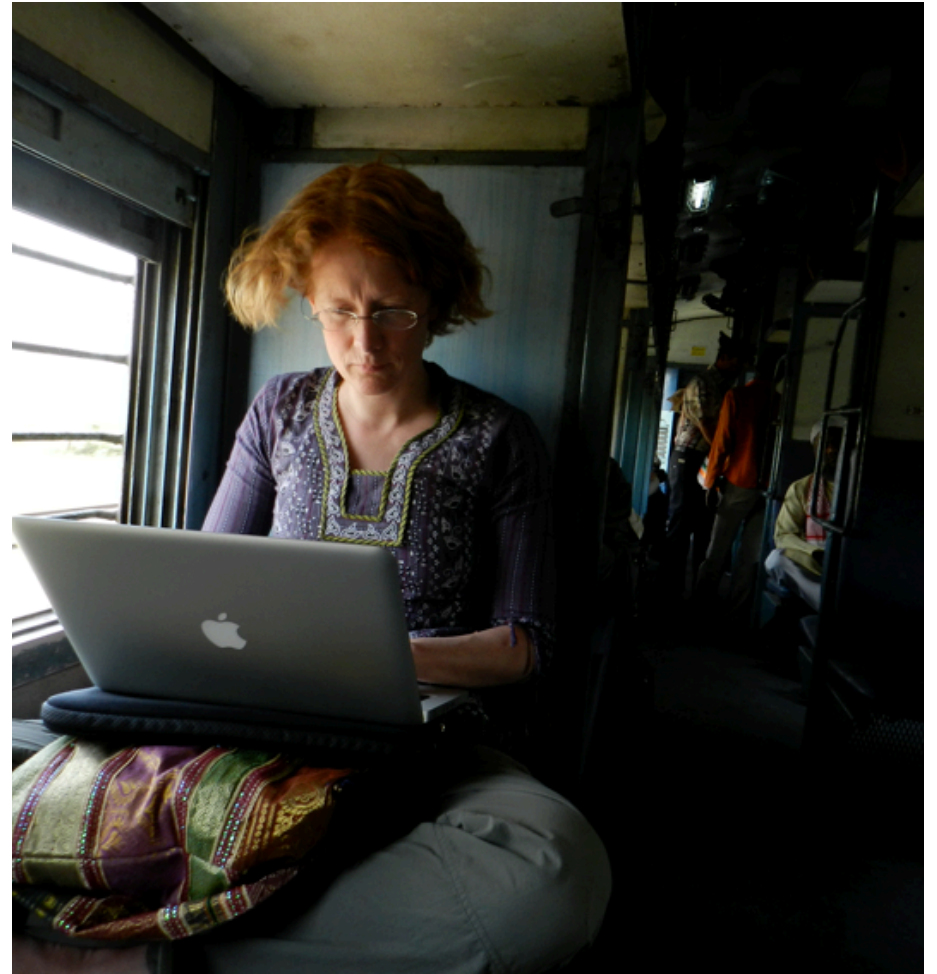
WoW - continued

- Design implications - WoW as learning environment
 - not only a product of how the game is designed, but also of the culture that players develop
 - Culture for mutual aid, also between strangers – ex. “buffs”
 - Suggests use of WoW to try out collaboration before forming teams
- Online games - not only products of designers’ intentions, but also of the culture that players develop
- Researchers got this insight by exposing themselves to this culture



Analysis in ethnography

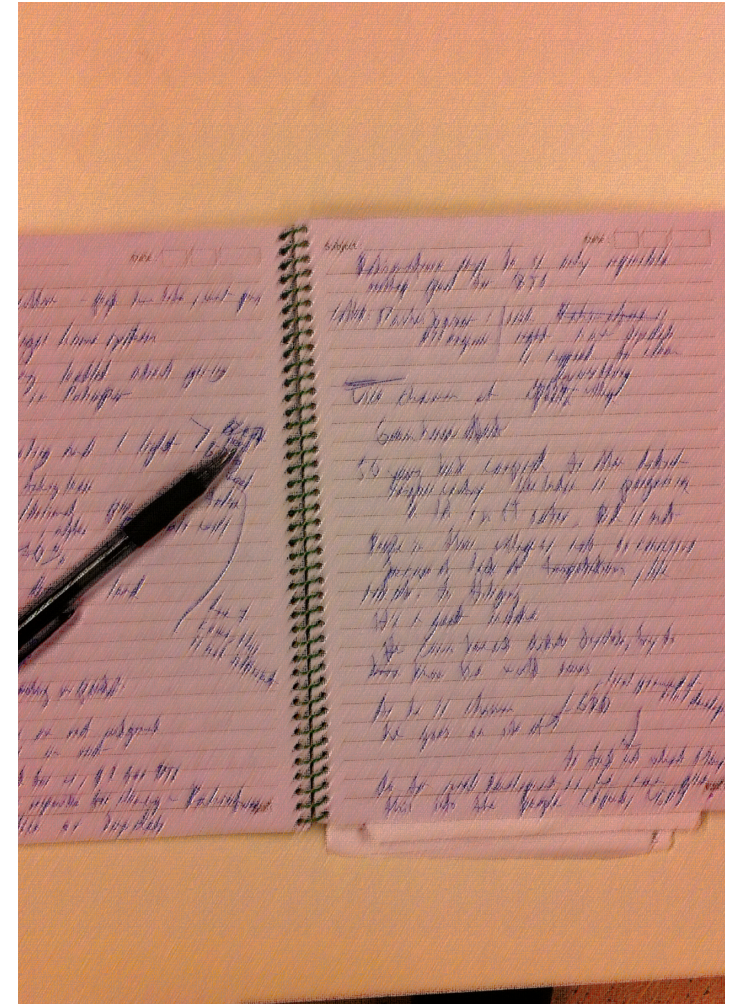
- Ethnography lit. means “to write about people”
 - Writing down fieldnotes
 - Writing out data
 - Writing up ethnography
- Choosing what to write down is part of the analysis
- Reflections on theory before and during fieldwork, as well as during writing
- Since data is produced in the interaction between the researcher and the informants, the researcher also needs to be present as a subject in the text



How can we evaluate ethnography?

Ethnography is subjective, how can it be a scientific method?

- Research on social relations is made out of social relations
- The questions and options for answers in a quantitative survey are also selected by someone
- Data never speaks for themselves – numbers are also interpreted
- A rigorous subjectivity
 - In ethnography, the subjective positioning of the researcher is made explicit
- Theoretical sampling
 - Making sure to recruit informants who can teach you about your area of interest from various perspectives
- Theoretical saturation
 - When new informants seem to repeat what others have told, you have reached saturation
- Theoretical adequacy
 - The researcher needs to read what others have written on the same subject and make sure to address tensions and commonalities



(Crang and Cook 2007)

Criticism and challenges

- Who has the right to represent? Who can talk for whom?
- To which extent do the informants have a say in how they are represented?
- Time consuming
- Often implicit rather than explicit design insights



Summary

- Study of social practices and interactions as they unfold in everyday life
- In design of IS: Studies of systems and artifacts as they are used in context
- Long-term and in-depth
- Descriptive rather than prescriptive
- Participant observation – immersion in the field
- The researcher's positionality influences her access to the field, what she see, and how she interpret what she sees
- Reflecting on this during fieldwork, analysis, and when writing up the research is crucial

