Ethnography in the Wild: Doing Design Ethnography with Organisations

Stuart Reeves, Joel Fischer, Corina Sas*, Andy Crabtree, and Mark Rouncefield*
Mixed Reality Laboratory, School of Computer Science, University of Nottingham
*School of Computing and Communications, Lancaster University
{str, jef, axc}@cs.nott.ac.uk, {c.sas, m.rouncefield}@lancaster.ac.uk

Abstract. With the rise of ‘in the wild’ research, collaboration between academic researchers and industry or third sector organisations has developed as a core practice within CSCW. While there is a substantial literature about the relationship between fieldwork and system design, the practical work involved in bringing ethnography to bear on third party organisations is an undeveloped area of inquiry. This workshop centres on sharing case studies of collaborations with organisations in the wild, in order to better understand what is involved in leveraging ethnography into third party organisations, along with the complex organisational matters that impact and shape this.

Introduction

The ‘turn to the wild’ (Crabtree et al., 2013) has seen collaboration between academic researchers and industry or third sector organisations develop as a core practice within systems design. While the intersections between fieldwork and design have received much attention (e.g., Anderson, 1992; Dourish, 2006), little attention has been paid to the leveraging of ethnography in the context of third party involvement and the collaborative work implicated in its accomplishment. This workshop seeks to elicit the day-to-day challenges academic researchers face
in ‘fitting’ ethnography into to the specific circumstances of a third party’s involvement in a given project (constrained by for example expectations, budget, organisational norms etc.). We ask the key question, what is the work that makes these collaborations work?

For instance, ethnographers might produce research findings oriented towards designers and software developers tasked with building a new system (or revising an existing one); these may be academic partners or members of collaborating industry or third sector organisations. At the same time ethnographers will probably have a related, but parallel relationship with the broader organisation (e.g., project managers, etc.), resulting in research findings being pitched very differently when interacting not only with the different stakeholders on a project, but also for different groups within collaborating stakeholder organisations. For example, ethnographers may have to convince the management and other gatekeepers before bringing designers into the loop.

Much has been written on the tricky relationship between fieldwork (often engaging in ethnography) and systems design (Anderson, 1992; Hughes et al., 1992; Hughes et al., 1994; Crabtree & Rodden, 2002; Crabtree et al., 2012), and this is encapsulated in the ‘implications for design’ debate (e.g., Dourish 2006; Crabtree et al., 2009). Much has also been written about practical strategies and techniques for building study findings into design (e.g., Twidale, Sommerville, Hughes, Crabtree, etc.). More recent work has empirically explored the various types of design implications generated to bridge fieldwork findings with design practice (Sas et al., 2014).

However, these accounts do not speak of or elaborate the practical intricacies of leveraging fieldwork findings into the negotiations involved in third party collaborations. In other words, the literature has tended to omit discussions of the work involved bringing study findings to bear on third party collaborations and the organisational features of this work. Instead, the traditional focus has been on the roles of ‘the ethnographer’ and ‘the designer’. Systems development is far more diverse an enterprise, especially in the wild, and as CSCW research has developed, so the diversification of these partners has increased. For example, our own practice has involved ethnographic and design work with charities (Fischer et al., 2014; Fischer et al., 2015) or creative groups (Reeves et al., 2015). The use of ethnography in the wild is, then, characterised by a diversity and complexity of engagements with a multitude of different partner organisations.

There is a gap in our understanding of what the use of ethnography turns upon in practice. In order to redress this, our workshop seeks to elicit participants’ personal experiences of engaging third parties with ethnographic work and leveraging ethnography into collaborations where there may be significant perspectival differences between the ethnographers, other researchers on the project (e.g., ‘the designers’), and non-academic, industry or third sector partners. In this way the workshop is about going beyond the now-standard descriptions of
the troubles involved in moving from ethnography to design to develop empirical evidence in concrete cases presented by workshop participants. In particular, goals of the workshop include collecting participants’ ‘war stories’, ‘best practices’, ‘lessons learned’, etc., in order to elaborate the work practices they employ to actively manage ethno-design-client relationships, the different ‘jobs’ of work involved in doing this, and the competences they bring to bear on the work including those that extend beyond what might be considered to be ‘ethnographic’.

**The workshop**

This one-day workshop seeks to bring together people interested in the *practical relationships* between ethnography and systems design, specifically in the context of collaborations that attempt *design for and with* industry (e.g., commercial) and third sector organisations (charity, NGOs, artists, etc.). We seek to elicit these relationships as deeply practical matters of research and design practice as understood and practiced by the members of the setting (i.e., ‘them and us’, as it were). We are interested in moving from the above-mentioned abstract notions of ‘designer’, ‘ethnographer’ and ‘client’ to grounded understandings through reviewing case studies provided by the organisers and participants of the workshop.

In this workshop we seek to reflect upon the methodic orders that members of collaborations employ in order to communicate and respond to fieldwork findings. This may include the following: how they produce design implications or requirements that are presented in the ‘right way’; how client feedback is elicited and employed whether those ‘clients’ are the ‘end users’, a commercial company, or colleagues operating in other research disciplines; how decision-making is achieved through the bringing together of ethnographic findings and partner organisational perspectives; and what resources might be produced and used as ‘boundary objects’ in the process. More specifically, we also ask what the ‘transitioning process’ from fieldwork to systems design (all the way to ‘finished’ product—whatever it might be) actually looks like, and what practices or modes of working exist within this process. Common modes may differ by the level of involvement of the research team after fieldwork; they may range for example from delivery of an ethnographic report (hands-off), to ‘member checking’ meetings to check and refine requirements (hand-over), all the way to a participatory design approach where the previously worked up requirements are iteratively implemented-tested-and-refined (hands-on).
Workshop goals

The workshop is intended to bring together contributions that examine the intersection of fieldwork (specifically ethnography) and design in the context of third party collaborations. In so doing, the aims of the workshop include:

- Finding similarities / differences in the ‘responsive’ ways in which workshop participants may have experienced ‘faltering from ethnography to design’ when working with third parties, i.e., design methods, strategies, tools;
- Compiling a collection of best practices / examples;
- Discussing ways of applying best practices / examples in order to guide research practice in the future;
- Setting the ground-work for a joint publication involving interested participants.

Participant contributions

We invite submissions of contributions (at most 20) at this intersection in the context of third party collaborations that include, but are not limited to:

- Case studies that illustrate / exhibits active management of the relationships between the perspectives of ethnographers, designers, and any ‘clients’;
- Practical insights into the work practices to make the relationships between ethnographers, designers, and clients work;
- Reflections on the production and use of specific ‘boundary objects’ (such as thick descriptions, implications for design, etc.) with particular emphasis on how they bridge ethnography, design, and interactions with any ‘clients’;
- Position papers that examine broader communicative issues in such collaborations.

On the day

Below we outline a preliminary suggested agenda for the day workshop. We note that the workshop structure will be responsive to the submissions received and dynamic in terms of the order of presentation. For instance, in cases where submissions have strong overlaps (e.g., two case studies of projects with similar organisational arrangements) we will offer shorter, combined timeslots.

AM:
- Introduction including an overview of the ‘state of play’ and brief history of the topic
- 1-minute presentations from all participants
• Group discussion based on above presentations, and attempt to cluster participants’ presentations for rest of day.
• Participant presentation session 1

PM:
• Participant presentation session 2 (if necessary)
• Group discussions: collecting the best practices to bridge stakeholder relations and/or case study examples etc.

Organisers

**Stuart Reeves** researches the design and deployment of interactive technologies for a range of cultural, performance, and public settings. He is a recently appointed EPSRC fellow and is investigating the relationships between theory and practice in HCI and UX. He is also author of the book *Designing Interfaces in Public Settings*.

**Joel Fischer** is an assistant professor at the School of Computer Science and a research fellow at the Mixed Reality Lab at the University of Nottingham. His research interests focus on CSCW and interactive systems for collocated settings, design ethnography, and mobile and ubiquitous computing ‘in the wild’. His recent research has included ethnomethodological studies and participatory design projects with non-profit organisations in energy advice and disaster response. Joel has previously worked at Fraunhofer Germany and Xerox PARC in the US, and he has more than 30 publications in CSCW, HCI and UbiComp.

**Corina Sas** is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Computing and Communications at Lancaster University. Her research interests focus on HCI, technologies for remembering and forgetting, creativity and sense-making. Her recent work has focused on the design knowledge captured by implications for design and various strategies employed for generating them, She has over 60 peer-reviewed publications and has been an investigator on grants totaling in excess of £5m.

**Andy Crabtree** is Reader in Computer Science at the University of Nottingham. He has published widely on ethnography and systems design, including the books *Designing Collaborative Systems: A Practical Guide to Ethnography*, and *Doing Design Ethnography*. He has conducted ethnographic work in a variety of social contexts, including workplaces, domestic environments, mixed reality and rural settings. His research has made substantive contributions to computer supported cooperative work, human-computer interaction, and ubiquitous computing, and he has contributed to methodological
debates concerning the nature and role of ethnography in systems design and IT research.

**Mark Rouncefield** is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Computing and Communications at Lancaster University. He was awarded a Microsoft European Research Fellowship in 2006 studying Social Interaction and Mundane Technologies and how these might afford 'social translucence', which involves making socially significant information visible, providing an awareness of others and their actions, rights and obligations and providing a mechanism for accountability. More broadly his research interests are in the field of Computer Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW) and involve the empirical study of the organisation of human interaction and how this impacts interactive systems design. He has published widely in CSCW conferences and journals, and is widely recognised as a champion of ethnography in systems design.

**Acknowledgments**

The organisers are grateful to support by EPSRC grants EP/M001636/1, EP/L02392X/1, and EP/K025848/1.

**References**


