

Dourish, P. (2006). Implications for design. *Proceedings of ACM CHI 2006: Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, New York: ACM, 541-550.

Notes by Anthony Hornof on 11/14/07.

This paper is a critique of how HCI and CHI researchers incorporate ethnographic techniques into their research and practice, and what is perceived as the goal and value of ethnography in HCI and at CHI. The established approach is to think of ethnographic practices as a means to gather requirements. This is problematic for many reasons, including that it (a) creates a hierarchy of practices, in which anthropology serves design, (b) can miss the point of ethnography, which includes understanding social situations and constructs independently of assigning judgement or value, and independently of trying to control or gain benefit from those situations, (c) emphasizes the insertion of technology rather than the removal of, and (d) somewhat supports the fallacious notion that ethnographies produces veridical truths independently of the biases, beliefs, and perspectives of the ethnographer.

Dourish does not argue against either ethnography or trying to improve technology through ethnography, but rather takes a critical, reflective view of how ethnography is being positioned within HCI and at CHI. He is, perhaps by analogy, arguing against “discount ethnography” (even as he does acknowledge that even this has its place and value) by reminding the reader of the broader benefits of ethnographic inquiry. The intellectual contributions of ethnography include the analytic and conceptual work of the ethnography itself, not just the recommendations and outcomes.

Interesting notes: The article points out how colonial officers depended on anthropologists to understand the indigenous people, as is currently done in Iraq, and how computer science is also starting to become seen as “in the service of” other more primary disciplines.

I am reading this paper a day before I need to submit my rebuttal to my CHI submission “Enter the Cloud of Unknowing.” Several reviewers seemed to be asking for more implications for design. I am wondering whether I can or should cite Dourish in explaining that implications for design are not the most important thing. This seems a little risky because I could get clobbered by people who for some reason do not *like* Dourish’s position, or perhaps more likely and worse yet, I could get clobbered because such a claim could be over-simplifying Dourish’s position. He is not arguing *against* implications for design but instead asking for deeper analysis. I do not believe that I am doing this deeper analysis, so citing his work could produce another barrage of criticisms along the lines of “Okay, fine, if you take Dourish’s position, then no you don’t have to have implications for design. But you have set up your study in such a way that *you* are looking for this outcome. So we are only judging you based on your own stated goals. Okay, if you want to do it Dourish’s way, then you are *completely* off the mark because that is not at all what you set out to do, or even started to accomplish. For example, you did not even tell us how old you are, or *anything* about your personal perspectives and biases.”

I know I do not fully understand this paper yet, but it is nonetheless a very exciting paper, I certainly get the drift, and I would very much like to return to it again in the future. It is interesting that this work was funded by multiple grants. I mean, how did he spend the money, sitting in his office and reading? Or perhaps he was conducting ethnographic research that helped him to understand these issues inside and out.