

Ethnography considered useful: situating criticality

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ABSTRACT

Increasingly the fields of Human Computer Interaction (HCI) and art are intersecting. Interactive artworks are being evaluated by HCI methods and artworks are being created that employ and repurpose technology for interactive environments. In this paper we steer a path between empirical and critical-theoretical traditions, and discuss HCI research and art works that also span this divide. We address concerns about ‘new’ ethnography raised by Crabtree et al. (2009) in “Ethnography Considered Harmful”, a critical essay that positions ethnographic and critical-theoretical views at odds with each other. We propose a mediated view for understanding interactions within open-ended interactive artworks that values both perspectives as we navigate boundaries between art practice and HCI.

Author Keywords

Situated action, open-ended, ethnography, interactive art, ethnomethodology, HCI, Interaction Design, installation art

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

INTRODUCTION

Given the ever-increasing dialogue between HCI and art, establishing a common language is one of the key issues facing researchers who work across traditional disciplinary boundaries and build a common purpose (Lehrer, 2010). The methods and language used by HCI researchers and the methods and language used by artists often appear incompatible. In “Ethnography Considered Harmful,” Crabtree et al (2009) argue against the changing nature of ethnography in systems design in returning ethnography to its cultural origins, and for the purposes of this paper excluding the situated critical-theoretical underpinnings particular to open-ended interactive environments. Our focus here is on an area of HCI research where a rigorous distinction between ethnographic and critical-theoretical methods cannot apply: that is, HCI research into open-

ended installations that require their participants to physically explore and actively construct their own meaning from direct experience with the work.

This work requires, on the part of the researcher, an understanding of concerns particular to HCI, art practice and theory. Both artists (including those who work within the arts industry, such as curators, art historians, theorists, critics, and writers) and HCI researchers are interested in and influenced by precedent work, but they differ in their focus. For HCI researchers the emphasis is generally on understanding people’s interaction with technology, improving the system design for use, and contributing to the research field with novel findings and methodologies. For artists the focus is generally on referencing precedent art works to address the content, intentions and motivations for building a work, as well as to extend possible readings of the work. From an art perspective, this form of “design practice” is grounded in the very critical-theoretical traditions that Crabtree et al (2009) hold up for scrutiny. However, we argue here that from an ethnomethodological perspective the situated environment of an interactive artwork needs to be considered in its entirety. In addition, participants interacting with these artworks are often consciously aware that their interaction intersects with cultural theoretical and art historical traditions. As such, any ethnography of situated interaction in interactive artworks cannot ignore critical/cultural theory. At interactive artworks then, we see the meeting of two bodies of knowledge and their specialist languages and methods (HCI and art), but equally we see a gap in the understanding of what each can contribute to the other.

In working to bridge this gap we argue for a more mediating, less polarised ethnomethodological approach and point to the necessity for a more inclusive model. A larger mediating model is put forward in a further study (Morrison, 2010), that employs ethnomethodological methods while working from a situated understanding that participants often directly interact with the art historical content and context, artist intent, social environment and/or background influences of open-ended installation works.

RELATED BACKGROUND

Recently, Interaction Design and HCI researchers have begun evaluating interactive art and/or interaction in museum settings (Hornecker & Sifter, 2006; Hornecker et

al. 2007) categorising observable participant-interaction found there (Jacucci et al. 2009). Other researchers work with informal learning in ludic interactive art environments (Petersson, 2006), bridging art and HCI perspectives (Morrison et al., 2007) or building a sensitising framework as a boundary object between HCI and another discipline, such as drama and performance (Benford et al. 2009).

In addition, extensive work from Heath et al. (2002) investigates the design of museum environments, participants' impact on each other within these environments, with an emphasis on sociable computing, awareness and/or sharing and access to the work (Hornecker et al. 2007). Other works address evaluation, ambiguity, and ludic non-functional interaction design-type products, that sit somewhere between art, design and social computing (Gaver et al. 2005; Gaver, 2007). These works and ensuing research publications combine humanities, philosophical, critical and cultural theory and visual art concerns with more reflective, singular or group perspectives (instances of particular use), adding this to HCI's already interdisciplinary mix (Dourish, 2004; Dourish et al, 2004; Sengers et al. 2005). This large volume of work, of which the above is but a small sample, sits at the border between HCI and art. These studies tend towards the HCI side of this divide with most researchers trained in some form of HCI.

Artist-researchers who span this middle-ground and tend towards the art side of this divide include Velonaki et al. (2008) and Penny (2008), who work with robotics and AI. These artists examine the relationships between interactive entities and people, offering different models of embodiment and interaction, as well as a critical voice on art and technology practice. Flanagan (2009) addresses concerns of games, play, culture and activism and adds an art-historical understanding to the discussion. Stern (2009) builds a relationship between interaction, interactivity and the body within interactive environments. These artists do not focus on evaluation, rather they take a deliberate stance with content, interrogating and/or subverting contemporary philosophical or political paradigms that their works might otherwise read as reinforcing.

HCI, Interaction Design, and art theory are in the early stages of finding a language to critically discuss interactive installation works. Dourish (2001) uses the language of phenomenological philosophy to discuss 'being in the world', active participation, embodiment, and experience, but does not necessarily discuss installation works. Where Interaction Designers do examine installation works, (Höök et al. 2003; Hornecker, 2004), they tend to frame their analysis in terms of product, design, system, awareness and so on, overlooking art-historical perspectives and research, which have often been instrumental to the very making of the works—given the referentiality of much art—and critical to its interpretation.

Many research groups such as the Palo Alto Research Centre (PARC), the Human Interface Technology

Laboratory New Zealand (HIT Lab NZ), and Creativity and Cognition Studios, Australia have been working directly with artists who include technology in their works. They do so in order to broaden interdisciplinary understanding (and to work with new ideas and novel use of technologies), in the same way as participatory design and experience design practices include stakeholders and end-users as participants in the design and production cycle (Jacucci et al. 2009).

SITUATED PRACTICE: INTERACTIONAL WORK PARTICULAR TO SITE

Having established background research in the area, we now engage with those sections of Crabtree et al.'s (2009) "Ethnography Considered Harmful" paper that have specific bearing on HCI research into open-ended interactive art. Much of the more recent writing around HCI evaluation of interactive art, design, and leisure or play activities assumes the need for a new set of terms so that not all instances of situated practice are described as 'work' (Bell et al. 2003; Gaver et al. 2005; Sengers et al. 2005; Morrison et al. 2007). Introducing terms such as 'ludic' and 'leisure' point to the need for a different approach from studies that examine situated action in the *workplace*. These terms also reflect an engagement, on the part of the researcher, with critical or cultural theoretical approaches, which are part of a more rhetorical humanities tradition.

Crabtree et al.'s (2009) paper, which provoked strong debate at CHI 2009, was written in direct response to these developments and to what they considered to be misuses of the term 'situated work' in the newer forms of ethnography infiltrating design. The authors rightly point out that *interaction work* takes place regardless of whether the work occurs in the "workplace, the home, on the streets, in museums" (p.887). That is, they argue, "the association of ethnography with the workplace reflects an old misunderstanding of what the notion of 'work' in this kind of ethnographic study means" (p. 880). The phrase "interaction work," then, does not simply refer to situated action occurring in the workplace, but rather to the work that interaction itself requires (the *interactional work*). That early studies largely occurred in the workplace merely reflects the situatedness of these studies. That recent studies reflect more leisure-based activities echoes the move of ubiquitous computing from the workplace to more mundane environments (Crabtree et al, 2009, Dourish, 2004), where the work of interaction still occurs.

This is borne out by Suchman's (2007) definition of situated actions as "contingent on specific, unfolding circumstances that are constituted through these same actions" (p. 27), with their significance measured "in relation to their social and material circumstances" (p.177). This definition allows a broader interpretation than that acknowledged by researchers advocating for the concept of 'ludism' used as a replacement for 'work' in particular settings—and reinstates the idea of 'the work of play' (Crabtree et al, 2005). Indeed, we can say that 'ludism' as interactional work is clearly covered by the notion of

situated action. However, Suchman (2007) does not consider the setting or context for situated action to be merely incidental. “The organization of situated action,” Suchman (2007) argues, “is an emergent property of moment-by-moment interactions between actors and between actors and the environments of their action” (p. 177), and does not come unencumbered. Instead, it is:

informed by prescriptive representations, past experience, future considerations, received identities, entrenched social relations, established procedures, built environments, material constraints (Suchman, 2007 p. 27).

These limitations surrounding *situatedness* (the preordained *baggage*) require constant revision, constituted by changing conditions of place, people, and times (the here and now). This is particularly relevant when considering open-ended interactive artworks, which invite participants to interact with computing and tangible artefacts in embodied, creative, self-directed, and critical ways in contrast to a more traditional “don’t touch” approach to art. Contemporary gallery spaces have been required to change their *established procedures* to accommodate interactive installations, so it becomes clear that what seem like entrenched social relations around how to behave with an art work in fact change, are contingent on, and are transformed by any number of contributing circumstances. These circumstances may range from, for example, material constraints of the environment, an ad-hoc collection of participants with varied experience arriving at the work at a particular moment in time (Heath et al. 2005), to how the work suggests and activates engagement for its participants.

Ethnography is useful for observation in social and public spaces, to study the methods that people employ to organise action, to interpret local “action and interaction” (Suchman, 2007) and the “accountable activity” that users participate in within “their own interpretive frameworks” (Crabtree et al. 2005, p.885). In attempting to make sense of observable everyday talk and action, ethnomethodology examines how *common sense* understandings are produced and how the mutual objective grounding of social facts (what everyone knows), is accomplished (Rouncefield, 2002). It is unsurprising then, that HCI researchers evaluating interactive art works have harnessed ethnographic methods to account for the relationship between action, interaction and interpretive frameworks in these settings.

While Crabtree et al. (2009) acknowledge ethnography’s “cultural origins”, they express concern about the “dangers” that a return to these cultural origins brings to the rigour of ethnographic fieldwork methods with subsequent implications for systems design and HCI more generally. As one example, they point to the dis-crediting of users’ critical faculties, by portraying users as “cultural dopes” (p. 884), by writing “*cultural interpretations*” (p.880), rather than reporting “what people observably say and do *in situ*” (p.881). This is of particular importance where as a method, ethnomethodology does not support “theoretically generated statements” (p. 886).

A PROPOSITION FOR A MEDIATED, INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

In response to Crabtree et al., we argue for an interdisciplinary approach that combines rigorous ethnographic methods with established art practice critical-theoretical traditions, to develop better methods for understanding situated practice in interactive art works. Art practice intersects with and is informed by art and critical theory. Even while considering the precedent works that inform art, art still remains a practice, and the situated work of participants in their interactions with interactive art can be evaluated in a tradition of “empirically grounded observations” based on the participants’ “practical engagement”. However, this emphasis on the observation of practical engagement does not mean that the traditions the works stem from need be ignored, nor that the understandings of the participants (their prior relationships with art traditions or *prescriptive representations*), be automatically dismissed as “theoretical” and therefore irrelevant to “practical engagement”.

In steering a path between the empirical and the critical-theoretical traditions, both here and elsewhere (Morrison, 2010), as artists/practitioners/researchers we need to understand that interactive art works are certainly, but not exclusively, engaged in systems design. Artists who create open-ended interactive art works do not see their ultimate goal as the “*actual building of new technology*” (Crabtree et al. 2009, p. 882); rather as creating a whole environment that provides an enriched or improved human experience, while using improved technology. The strength of boundary work between HCI and art (the kind of mediating model we argue for (Morrison, 2010)) is that, while practising ethnomethodological methods, we are not limiting what can be said about these works by ignoring arts and humanities analytical-critical traditions. This is because the very works that we are analysing emerge directly from and/or are in direct dialogue with these same arts and humanities analytical-critical traditions. Neither do we consider those who participate in the works to be blind to those traditions. In adding art and critical references to these discussions, we are deliberately *not* treating the audience as *cultural dopes*. We agree that rigorous ethnography requires reporting “what goes on in social settings and develop[ing] concrete insights of relevance to design by carefully explicating what people do and say there” (Crabtree et al, 2009, p. 887). We need also highlight, that in an art context *what people do and say* has a direct relationship to the artist’s intent, and to the perception of the participants, as to what it is that they *should be doing there* in this (sometimes) non-mundane, non-everyday environment. What the environment affords is particular to, built upon, informed by, and respondent to arts and humanities analytical-critical-theoretical traditions (just as work environments are informed by an understanding of workplace and user requirements). In building a case to include these particulars, we open up the discussion to allow additions particular to the environments of other inter-disciplines.

In addition, linking new and old bodies of knowledge is a way to “draw lessons from” (Dourish, 2001, p. 191) foundational work from other disciplines that have long examined these issues. Missing from the HCI explication of *situated action* (what it is that people do there) is an understanding of the existential depths of human experience: a way to discuss, and better understand the illogical, whimsical, impulsive, creative, expressive uniqueness of ourselves. Certainly, the more interesting interactive art works are those that explicate these aspects (Velonaki, 2008; Penny, 2008; Stern, 2009).

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we argue for building an inclusive ethnomethodological approach for interdisciplinary work that sits at the borders of art and HCI. Our intent is to enable participants interacting in cultural environments to intersect with the theoretical considerations of works, while acknowledging participants retain their *past experience*, their *received identities*, relevant to what takes place at the time of interaction (Suchman, 2007, p. 27). We argue for a mediating model that acknowledges the situatedness of its own practice (and from where the work derives) and its intersection with the methodological approach of an ethnomethodological one.

In the phenomenological tradition “embodiment has played a critical role” for us “to draw out a model of how and why embodied interaction works, a model that can support both analysis and design” (Dourish, 2001, p.191), and from this we gain a foundational understanding to both draw on knowledge and to build ways to apply such a model. An intellectual mix, though often uncomfortable, generates “a distinct type of interaction” forcing scientists “to rely on metaphors and analogies to express themselves” (Lehrer, 2010) and we argue for building an inclusive commonsense language in an expanding area of research interest

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