

CHAPTER FOUR | DESIGN ETHNOGRAPHY

INTRODUCTION

This chapter is particularly significant for the web design workflow, as design ethnography, utilizing participant observation, necessitates the building of meaningful relationships that impact technological acquisition for nonprofits. By entering into a web design process, where collaboration is valued and knowledge exchange is desired, nonprofits are able to become more comfortable accessing technology, slowly integrating the maintenance of their website into the organization, rather than handing over a black box (i.e. website). To better understand the value of design ethnography, I will provide a description of its relation to “traditional” anthropological fieldwork; misconceptions in both the design and anthropological world; and examples from my own research that stress the worth of participant observation.

WHAT IS ETHNOGRAPHY?

A strong debate over the definition of ethnography has manifested within the discipline of anthropology due to arguments over the validity of writing styles, fieldwork methods and presentation. While the debate continues, so does ethnography and here I will attempt to portray my own understanding.

Ethnography has a dual meaning, as it can be both written¹ and practiced. Written ethnography, “...focuses on a particular population, place and time with the deliberate goal of describing it to others” (Barnard & Spencer 1996: 193). This basic definition satisfies the curious onlooker, but does not grasp the complexity of what anthropologists work to portray from their time in the field.

¹ I will be excluding other forms of ethnographic media due to the limited scope of this paper; however, much work has been done in visual anthropology, among other subdisciplines.

One contemporary change that muddles this definition is the increasing popularity of multi-sited fieldwork. Studies that focus on a particular population are still undertaken, but the generalized population (rather than seen as the object of study) is considered in context for a specific subculture, societal event or a manifestation of relationships. As stated by Geertz, “The locus of study is not the object of study. Anthropologists don’t study villages (tribes, towns, neighborhoods); they study *in* villages” (1973: 20, emphasis in original). Moreover, physical place is no longer a key determinate in terms of the actual, due to the real interactions that occur through online media. Furthermore, time is best used as a measure of contextualization rather than one of definition:

‘Cultures’ do not hold still for their portraits. Attempts to make them do so always involve simplification and exclusion, selection of a temporal focus, the construction of a particular self-other relationship, and the imposition or negotiation of a power relationship. [Clifford 1986: 10]

In the introduction to *Writing Culture*, James Clifford (1986) provides a thorough definition of written ethnography, alongside insecurities resulting from, “...being situated *between* powerful systems of meaning” (Clifford 1986: 2, emphasis in original). Through written ethnography, anthropologists depict the field work experience in a way that allows them to engage with reflexivity to recognize and allow outside interpretations; to create an academic work that is *one* rendition of the truth. Clifford states that ethnographic writing is determined in at least six ways:

(1) contextually (it draws from and creates meaningful social milieu); (2) rhetorically (it uses and is used by expressive conventions); (3) institutionally (one writes within, and against specific traditions, disciplines, audiences; (4) generically (an ethnography is usually distinguishable from a novel or travel account); (5) politically (the authority to represent cultural realities is unequally shared and at times contested); (6) historically (all the above conventions and constraints are changing). [1986: 6]

Following these six conditions, Clifford describes these works as “coherent ethnographic fictions”, noting the alarm that may arise in doing so. Due to the

inherent subjectivity of field work, data collection, personal bias and literary processes, it is simply impossible to claim ethnographic texts contain unequivocal truth. “Ethnographic texts are inherently *partial*”, states Clifford (1986: 7, emphasis in original), each constructed through their own individual networks to the exclusion of others. The realization of the existence of these subjective networks may shatter the romanticized view of the archetypical anthropological explorer and general expert on “culture”, but allows for a powerful dialogue to emerge that engages with the participants of the networks created throughout fieldwork and academic experiences. It is within this stage that theory is utilized to contextualize what was found during fieldwork and written ethnography the predominant medium for doing this.

The writing and reading of ethnography are overdetermined by forces ultimately beyond the control of either an author or an interpretive community. These contingencies – of language, rhetoric, power and history – must now be openly confronted in the process of writing. [Clifford 1986: 25]

Before summation of written ethnography’s description, it is helpful to draw on Geertz (1973) to understand how anthropologists look upon and depict social interactions. Geertz helps us to appreciate the goal of ethnography by explaining the difference between a simple description and a ‘thick description’. A thick description incorporates not only the actions of an actant or the proceedings of an event, but the affiliated social consequences and the social code that may have produced them². It is the role of anthropologists to recognize this difference and integrate theory that frames the thick description of a particular social event so it no longer appears meaningless to the unfamiliar outsider. The goal is not to make grand claims about human culture, but to provide the means to express the importance of the role of culture in everyday life (Geertz 1973: 26). Combining thick description with ‘cultural poesis’, or the “constant reconstitution of selves and others through specific exclusions,

² The famous example provided by Geertz: the difference between a physically uncontrolled wink and a wink that signals to one’s friend (1973: 6).

conventions and discursive practices” (Clifford 1986:25), moves anthropologists to create reflexive accounts that translate cultural meaning to the best of their ability.

ETHNOGRAPHY AS PROCESS

“...if you want to understand what a science is, you should look in the first instance not at its theories or its findings, and certainly not at what its apologists say about it; you should look at what the practitioners of it do.”

– Clifford Geertz (1973: 4)

Barnard and Spencer state, “The selection of a particular population or site for ethnographic research is ordinarily related to some unanswered question or outstanding problem in the body of comparative anthropological theory” (1996: 195). While these theories and issues may bring anthropologists to the field, upon arrival, anthropologists must find the ethnographic research methods best suited to connecting with participants in ways that disentangle their proposed research questions from the greater context of the fieldwork site. Ethnography contains a variety of methods, quantitative and qualitative (e.g. from questionnaires to semi-structured interviews); however participant observation holds the predominant position within anthropology and is the method emphasized in this work.

In Bernard’s *Research Methods in Anthropology* (2005), he describes participant observation as “what you do during field work”, requiring the researcher to become part of the community they are attempting to study. The majority of participant observation data is qualitative, such as field notes³; photographs; and semi-structured interviews, but can also include quantitative data, such as surveys. Participant observation allows for cultural immersion and a building of rapport that results in both acquiring and experiencing data, rather than merely directly noting what people declare or demonstrate. It is common knowledge in anthropology that what people say they do, is often contrary to what they are

³ Descriptions of daily events and happenings by anthropologist.

actually *doing*. “If you are a successful participant observer, you will know when to laugh at what people think is funny; and when people laugh at what you say, it will be because you *meant* it to be a joke (Bernard 2005: 344, emphasis in original).

DEFINITION OF DESIGN

Design has two primary meanings relevant to this thesis. The first is design as a noun describing a design artifact. For example: I as a web designer can create a visual design for a website to be viewed online, which may be considered a well-done or poor “piece of design”. Secondly, design can be a verb that describes a process. In order to build a website, I must go through the process of visually and structurally designing the website. The definition of ‘design’ in ‘design ethnography’ involves either the visual and/or technological designs. This is the visual artifact (graphic document) or technological artifact (computer); both of which can be considered a design artifact either separately or combined. Therefore a website can be a design artifact influenced by design ethnography; designed well aesthetically and functionally. It is also important to clarify that designs which are functional can be visual as well as technical. In this way, well - done visual design increases the chances of the correct usage of any given designed technological artifact⁴.

WHAT IS DESIGN ETHNOGRAPHY?

Design ethnography is applied anthropology that can be defined in two main contexts: ethnography completed prior to the development of a product to inform the design (process, visual and/or technological) or the use of ethnography to study an artifact already in place in order to assess the design’s impact or need for future alterations⁵. In popular usage, design ethnography is

⁴ Usability studies, interaction design, user-experience design and user-centered design, which focus on how individuals experience and interact with design, play major roles in this goal.

⁵ It is important to distinguish that one can do ethnography of an existing technological artifact and in principle call it “design ethnography”. However, more often this is described as a STS

practiced with the goal of improving or creating a design that will be successfully utilized by an end-user (e.g. a website's audience), as opposed to creating a written ethnography as seen in academic anthropology. In my research, design ethnography is used with *Druid Cycles* to understand the impact of their current website and how it can be improved. With *Pedal Power*, design ethnography was used prior to the development of the website to understand the cycling club and its website needs.

As briefly described in the *Context* chapter of this thesis, design ethnography is used predominantly by three types of individuals: the academically trained anthropologist that works with design projects; individuals trained specifically in design ethnography or some variant of user-experience research; and designers who take on the role of ethnographer when necessary, with intuition as their primary resource (Macaulay 2000).

For the latter two, ethnography has become a buzzword in the design and technology industry, which clients are beginning to ask for and designers are attempting to sell. Ethnography is often seen by web designers to be synonymous with participant observation or field work, listed alongside interviewing or focus groups as a separate method⁶. The descriptions associated with any of these methods, tells future clients that with such research, they will have further insight into the needs of their customer base, resulting in a more usable website. "Ethnography has been so intuitively appealing to designers (and their clients) because it promises to reveal a whole new dimension of 'the user'" (Wasson 2000: 378). Contentions have arisen as a result of such definitions and variety of uses of ethnography, not aligned with academic anthropology.

study or part of design anthropology, as these are disciplines that study design artifacts in situ, not necessarily working toward development or alteration.

⁶For an example, see list at: <http://www.bunnyfoot.com/services/ucd.html>

ETHNOGRAPHIC MISCONCEPTIONS IN THE TECHNOLOGY and DESIGN INDUSTRY

Diane Forsythe (1999) clearly outlines six major misconceptions about conducting ethnography in the technology and design industry. I will explore each of these in turn, providing supporting examples from my own work.

1. *Anyone can do ethnography - it is just a matter of common sense.* Forsythe states that many people see ethnography as something that does not require training and that one can jump right into, when in fact, ethnography actually counters common sense as it requires one to problematize things people take for granted, often questioning what are seen as “truths” (1999: 130). Two versions of this issue appeared in my research. First, many web professionals did not realize they were conducting the beginnings of ethnographic practice in their daily job. They were simply doing what needed to be done to fulfill their job duties.

...also every now and then I find myself, writing content for the website or newsletter and find myself participating more in the whole project. Like recently we went to a music festival as Klasse and I also as volunteer was there to talk to people who visit us, answer their questions and ask them a few questions about how they felt about the magazine and website. And actually that has grown on me, and you get drawn into, I think it is unavoidable. It's more, whereas if you are building a site for a soft drink company you don't really care about the soft drink usually, and now it's more personal. [Interview with Toon Van de Putte, 17 May 2010]

She [web designer's wife and business partner] was in Romania for a few months because she wanted to meet people and promote the work, and the women and she stayed with friends there, and people opened up their homes to her, and she realized in a way they were already involved. It wasn't really just her anymore. So we wanted to acknowledge this in the design, and this was the big change we were working towards. [Interview with Ronen Hirsh, 26 April 2010]

Second, web designers took on the task of ethnography because it was what their clients wanted, regardless of training or education. This broaches an issue in the design industry of valuing the end product rather than the process, as a result of monetary restrictions that limit the procurement of external resources, such as trained professionals or their own education.

2. *Being insiders qualifies people to do ethnography in their own work setting.* This assumes an expert model, where the most senior individual will have the best understanding of how all levels of an organization work, yet Forsythe contests it is often the outside ethnographer, with inside experience, that works best (1999: 130). In relation to the STS aspect of my research, which required communication with web designers and Wordpress users, I found my knowledge of web design essential. Without such prior knowledge, my interviewees would have been forced to define a copious amount of basic terminology and I would not have been able to satisfactorily converse at web networking events about current issues in design. Furthermore, by conducting design ethnography with the cycling nonprofits I was an insider through my possession of a road bike; understanding of basic maintenance; and passion for the sport. Without such connections, I would have been less able to convey my ideas about cycling and build rapport. This meant I was still understood as an outsider, but had the inside experience about cycling that allowed initial dialogue.
3. *Since ethnography does not involve preformulated study designs, it involves no systematic method at all - "anything goes".* Anthropology has an expectation for shifts in research as data sets build, while in a natural science study, detours change the entire nature of the project (1999: 130). This relates to the misconception that ethnography is the same process as participant observation (discussed below), thus supposedly eliminating the need for further research methods that allow for data triangulation

and fact checking. Anthropological methods (e.g. participant observation, interviews or surveys) may not be completed in linear fashion, but do have the power to impose greater structure and organization of data upon their completion.

4. *Doing field work is just chatting with people and reporting what they say.* Forsythe states this may be seen as the case because people often only see transcriptions and recordings, not recognizing that that this information is data that informs, not the final result of, a study. The job of the field worker is to analyze what people say, engaging with theory and literature (1999: 131). I hope to combat this misconception by placing all my field notes and transcriptions online so readers can see my research process and data in comparison to the final thesis.
5. *To find out what people do, just ask them.* (Which as stated in Chapter 1, I would like to add, *To find out what people want just ask them.*) Ethnographers conducting short term research often make the mistake of accepting participants' statements as truth and reflective of their current state or actions. People simply do not do what they say; and what people do "a few times", is not necessarily indicative of what they do "all the time" (1999: 132). For many web designers, the information upon which a website is determined is gained by directly asking their client what they want on their website. Design ethnography is about triangulating this data, valuing the client's desires, while also conducting research that further supports or denies client wants (and any suggestions made by web designers).
6. *Behavioral and organizational patterns exist "out there" in the world, observational research is just a matter of looking and listening to detect.* This leaves the observer to detect what they want to find based on their own personal background and research objectives (1999: 133). If one is simply observing, one is categorizing what they see based on their own notions of the world. This follows into the construction of websites that require a hierarchy of pages to be divided based on what the nonprofit

organization is about and the content to be shared. For a number of web designers, the process of website construction is based on previous clients and experiences. While there are certain web conventions required, design ethnography allows web designers to conduct research that challenges previous information hierarchies and designs.

Ethnography as invisible work

Continuing from these misconceptions is Forsythe's idea of ethnography as invisible work (1999). What people see anthropologists doing is interviewing, transcribing and taking raw notes, but ethnography actually contains deeper theoretical analysis, often enmeshed in theses, written documents and field notes. For many people, accessing or understanding such documents is a difficult task, limiting accurate perceptions of ethnography and causing aspirant researchers to fail in reflexively acknowledging how their knowledge was obtained.

This leads to the point that ethnography in the design world is mainly done as process, not as a written work. While higher level studies, done by academic or hired anthropologists in technology or design projects have the time and energy to write full ethnographies, this is not the case for smaller (in size and budget) projects. For many web design projects, the faster the project is completed the more money can be made.

In contrast to academic ethnography where social scientists conduct years of participant observation, in a business context, ethnographies (read: participant observation) can last a half a day or even less. How is this possible?" [Plowman 2003: 5]

Lengthy bouts of participant observation with time for reflection rarely happen, which is why many designers have come up with new forms of ethnography such as contextual inquiry or rapid ethnography.

Contextual inquiry requires the researcher to observe the participant in the context of the studied technology's use and does not require the researcher to participate. Outlined below are four further conventions:

1. A user should be interviewed in the context in which a product is used or the work is performed,
2. The user is a partner in the design process,
3. The designer must interpret the facts gathered about users' behaviors, their environment, and what they say to uncover design implications,
4. The interview must have a focus, allowing the interviewer to subtly direct it without using a set questionnaire. [Fluid 2010]

Rapid ethnography, on the other hand is simply conducting ethnography in a short time span. This is said to achieve success through the proper organization of ethnographers and diverse research tools prior to going into the field.

Rapid Ethnography is:

...a collection of field methods intended to provide a reasonable understanding of users and their activities given significant time pressures and limited time in the field. The core elements include limiting or constraining the research focus and scope, use key informants, capturing rich field data by using multiple observers and interactive observation techniques and collaborative qualitative data analysis. [Millen 2000: 280]

ETHNOGRAPHIC CONTENTIONS

These shortened methods coalesce into a central problem with the use of ethnography in the field of design. The Anthrodesign listserv⁷ has provided a forum for this discussion on a number of occasions. The group consisting of those interested in anthropology and design as outlined in their mission:

We are interested in the role of applied anthropology in the corporate, public sector, and medical contexts. Not all list members are anthropologists, but group members share the common interest of applying ethnographic techniques and social sciences theory to

⁷ <http://tech.groups.yahoo.com/group/anthrodesign/>

industrial, software, and other types of product design. [Anthrodesign Yahoo Group]

One such discussion centered on an Anthrodesigner's post discussing anthropology's "proverbial year of fieldwork" and the ways in which it is still essential to the discipline.

Hello folks,

I've been thinking, on and off, about the "one year" of field work most anthropology departments require of their students to prove their competence. (Proviso: as a sociologist, I was exempt from this requirement, but my supervisors did pick through my data looking for evidence of "gender").

I've come to think of this one-year requirement as, frankly, bullshit.

There are a lot of reasons for this. The first thing that comes to mind is the holier-than-thou position granted to those in the Ivory Tower, who are receiving a full salary and/or pension, who are delighted to send the plebes "back into the field," just as Her Majesty would exclaim "Off with their heads!" But the second thing that comes to mind is the real sense of doubt they must have that less than one year gives you "the real story." Isn't this just exactly the same as the dreaded "How many people did you talk to?" question? Isn't this just as ignorant as "Well, your sample size is rather small"? I believe there is no "real story" and those that think more time in the field will somehow reveal this "real story" are deluded for several reasons.

[...]

Anthropologists, I'm especially interested in what you think of this: MUST we have a year in the field? Or are we fooling ourselves?

Comments encouraged! [Ladner 2010]

What the discussion revealed, was a collection of people providing histories of anthropology, detailing why the year has been necessary in the past, citing seasonal changes paired with rites of passage; "exotic" lands requiring more time for language acquisition; writing time for ethnographies and the way in which university schedules work.

People were ready to critique this one year standard with the consensus that fieldwork is unique to every situation and person. A successful ethnography is not about simply gathering more data, but in recognizing emergent patterns that indicate you can move forward. One anthrodesigner stated, “Time is always a factor in conducting research, but I don’t think it should trump the research question, the phenomenon being studied or the results being produced” (Chenail 2010).

Much of the discussion and insecurities relate back to Bernard (2005) and his suggested methods for fieldwork. He states that it is possible to do successful ethnography in just a few days, if one is already familiar with the topic of study. What participant observation does is to help you “intellectualize” what you already know in that case. However he does not disregard the fact that some fieldwork to be successful must take decades (2005: 349).

Ethnographic theory and practice in design

This brings us to the issue of combining theory and practice as design ethnography is often seen to uphold practice to the exclusion of theory. To truly conceptualize and collate the relationships and experiences of participant observation, theoretical frameworks can be said to be essential. However, theory for anthropologists often fulfills the end-goal for research, the “So what?” as concisely stated by Wolcott (2005: 181). In applied work, theory is either omitted or serves as guidance, with the reason for ethnographic research manifested in a final successful design.

As put forth by one design ethnographer:

... I think all that sort of putting up the rigor flag is... it seems like boundary protection to me. Because, if nothing, I am a hybrid creature, I have an undergraduate degree in computer science. I worked at a furniture [inaudible] company doing research for them. So my metric was doing eventual, the end result of the research and what the impact was and how it was done. [Interview Anonymous, May 17, 2010]

Furthermore, it is simply difficult to state the necessity of using theory in design ethnography for those not trained in anthropology or related disciplines. Macaulay et al. proposes that levels of intuition required for the practice of participant observation are equally unstable, and while theory may be difficult to attain intellectually, it can be taught (2000: 43). As Macaulay et al.'s work deals with the training of ethnographers within a project; this presupposes theory being provided to field workers as frameworks to follow, rather than individuals searching for their own theory base.

Design ethnographers are not required to communicate with the academic system and are subject to an entirely separate set of environmental conditions and systemic logic binding them to the design and technology industry, rather than academia. I would argue that if those practicing design ethnography are not tied to academia, ethnographic data can be communicated and framed through the creation of design documentation as defined by the workflow (see Chapter 6) of their industry and end-goal (i.e. creation of a website). The important result of design ethnography is that it changes the nature of the client – web designer relationship by allowing deeper insight into the structure, processes and goals of a nonprofit organization which will be manifested in the final product. As Wolcott (2005) puts more bluntly, “As for using theory explicitly, however, my advice is, if it works for you, use it, but if it is only *making* work for you, get on with some more productive task instead (2005: 175, emphasis in original).

For web designers and/or design ethnographers neither working on a research team nor with training in anthropology, finding a theoretical framework may prove difficult, but should be viewed as a valuable endeavor if possible. I have seen in my own research using ANT and systems theory, that the organization of the relationships at work in the process of web design, moving downward into my own web design workflow, has been greatly clarified. Moreover, such overarching theoretical structures will prove useful for future endeavors in

design ethnography, creating greater ease of use each time the theory is employed and manifests itself in concrete examples.

TWO CASE STUDIES: DESIGN ETHNOGRAPHY IN THE NONPROFIT SECTOR

Design ethnography has a particular use within the nonprofit sector as a result of the norms of the anthropological ethnographic process. Anthropology rarely sees its practitioners involved in the study of a particular population group without deeper cause or attachment. Ties to specific community traits, activist anthropology, and new visual methods have given anthropologists further license to be involved in causes that they are passionate about (Pink 2006, Scheper-Hughes 1995).

In my use of design ethnography for the following two nonprofits, I chose to use participant observation as my sole ethnographic method for a few key reasons⁸. First, participant observation would allow me to build strong relationships with volunteers and members of staff. Nonprofits are structured around a core cause, thus it had to be known that I was up to speed on and aligned with their goals. For the web designer, deeper understanding and compassion for the nonprofit's mission will affect design and workflow decisions at later stages. Secondly, I needed to understand what the customers, participants and website end-users of the nonprofits wanted. By working in the shop of Druid Cycles I was able to speak to individuals while they waited for repairs and at Pedal Power during the cycling club events. Third, participant observation was essential for grasping the structure of the organization in order to determine if Wordpress was still a viable website software option and how the website would be maintained the conclusion of my fieldwork. Finally, an overarching reason for utilizing participant observation was the simple fact that nonprofits are busy. Participant observation allows the researcher to have conversations, rather than interviews, impromptu meetings rather than scheduled events. This makes the design

⁸ See Chapter 8 for full discussion

process and the website itself a fluid part of the organization rather than an outside actant.

Case Study #1: Druid Cycles

Druid Cycles is a community interest company⁹ located in London, England. Operating predominantly through exchange of goods and volunteer services rather than monetary payment for repairs, the shop has become quite popular with students and those looking to keep their expenses down. The staff is mainly composed of rotating mechanics from Eastern Europe and Russia as Thor, the owner of the shop, hails from East Germany and learned Russian quite fluently during his time in the military as a tank engineer.

One of my first days in the shop was spent at a small celebration for Druid Cycles' first birthday, the location of which was a vacant storefront that Thor had managed to procure for a few months to use as storage through a friendship and exchange with the owners of the complex. Over the next few weeks, I managed odd jobs around the shop, acting as an impromptu receptionist, administrative staff member and tech assistant, only completing minor bike repairs such as changing flats, patching tires and lending a helping hand wherever needed. I was unsure about these tasks, as I felt I should be working more directly with bikes. I was there to be a participant observer at a cycling organization, so should I not be spending more time on repairs and maintenance?



Entrance to Druid Cycles

⁹ One type of nonprofit organization in England. For detailed definition see *Chapter 5*

For this research I decided to keep my field notes online as a blog (see Chapters 7 and 8), so one night I composed a post on my insecurities about my shop duties. I also mentioned that the tasks I was undertaking made it feel more as though I was studying in a small business rather than a nonprofit/shop.

Just a few quick notes today.

*Worked on a small poster for the shop as a start to getting a feeling for what sort of designs should be used on the website.

*Thinking about basic logos with Thor, he mentioned something related to Druids, with a type of bird, or relation to oak tree etc...using photos from website from artist that had done a nice graffiti example.

In general, I am enjoying myself immensely at the shop, but I believe that I will need to cut down on some of the tasks that I am taking on. However, I do enjoy these tasks and they are needed. I will have to think about this more tonight.

Also, Druid is definitely a community organization/shop rather than a nonprofit which significantly changes the value of my research. While many of the ideals are the same, I understood the shop differently before arriving at the location. Certainly many of the processes mirror nonprofits, but may affect the validity of my research, if the shop does not have actual nonprofit status. However, within “nonprofits”, a term I am yet to unpack, I will be including government organizations and community orgs. More to think about. [Author field notes, 4 June 2010]

I send this to Thor for him to read if he had the time, and I came into the shop, immediately realizing something was wrong, but got work as usual, until Thor stopped milling about to say, “Kristina, Druid Cycles is not a business”.

Upon reading the message he had taken my thoughts about his shop as a small business rather than shop/community organization to be quite offensive. In saying what I did, he stated I had suggested all the work he had done was for himself and not the cycling community of London. More specifically, I had implied he was a Capitalist, when in fact he is influenced by many Communist ideals.

Forgetting that I sent Thor a poorly organized field notes post, rather than a composed email, I managed to fail to put together these facts: that all his workers are from former socialist countries (thus making shop life smoother); he had fond memories from East Germany for a reason and the values he placed on neighborly exchange. This necessary jolt had brought me into the world of participant observation.



Thor and Ion in the shop. Photo: Philip Firsov

The importance of this event and a consequence of design ethnography was that the rift clearly exposed the structure and mission of Druid Cycles. What I had needed to recognize was that my own role in the shop was indicative of the mission and organization of Druid Cycles, which valued collaboration and use of individual skill-sets for a more efficient working environment. I had not seen my role, as aligning with Druid Cycles' goals until this point, as I had been too preoccupied with what I thought needed to be done to authenticate *my research*. Without being a participant observer and without taking the time to build relationships with members of the shop, I would have never had the

opportunity to make this mistake and thus the realization of the shop's structure.

Cast Study #2 – Pedal Power

Pedal Power is a cycling club for adults with learning and physically disabilities, run by an extremely busy group of individuals, for all of whom the club is an



Pedal Power cycling club at Finsbury Park. Volunteer, supporters and participant all getting ready for a ride.

outside volunteer activity. The challenge for me in working with this group was finding the best method of communication that worked for everyone, due to the inability to be part of the group more than every other Saturday at their cycling club event and the club not having a central office.

As the cycling club is quite small and did not have ample time to learn any project management software, I first attempted having everyone comment on the same blog post. I hoped that the idea of blogging and the public nature of the comments would spur conversation, while also keeping everyone on the same page. However, only part of the group was comfortable with online methods of conversation and comments never reached above two or three in

number. My second attempt was simply in using email; however the “reply all” function was overwhelming for anyone who did not have a Gmail account, which collates threads. In order to minimize the number of email messages, I decided to keep documentation related to the website online and use my participant observation time at cycling events to brainstorm with other club members. Therefore email became the forum for direct approval of documentation and sending of content.

I worried about Forsythe’s “systems of deletion”, feeling that only communicating in person during cycling events may cause me to inadvertently delete social relationships, impacting the production of the website. Although I attempted to convince Pedal Power members all comments were welcome anytime online, it was often necessary to double check website decisions during cycling events. This ended up making for essential conversation, as members nearly always had further ideas or feedback in person because the conversation was inspired by the happenings of the cycling club, not by a design document that they did not connect with. Jo, the lead organizer, was particularly helpful in bringing creative ideas, such as bicycle poetry, to the conceptualization, but only offered these thoughts during the cycling events. Outside of these events, she was simply too busy to brainstorm concepts for a medium she was unaccustomed to.

In brainstorming for the website, I realized that while this particular group would need their singular technologically inclined volunteer to keep up the website, what was equally essential was the creativity of ideas provided for content of the site. Through participant observation we agreed upon three main groups of people: the participants, volunteers, and supporters; along with several basic categories for navigation; and upon the completion of the website’s base, more ideas began to come. It is here where I realized that while I had knowledge about web design, I had much to learn about their organization. Regardless of whether or not the organization is comfortable using technology,

they are comfortable in teaching their mission: something the web designer probably knows as do the organization members about web design.

This specific experience was important as it solidified the necessity of training the member of Pedal Power who desired and was most comfortable taking on website tasks after completion and reminded me of the importance of face-to-face communication. Simply because a website is being built, does not require that communication be online; nor do all members of an organization need to be technologically adept. In this particular circumstance the structure of Pedal Power required one person to take charge and to utilize the strengths of others elsewhere when necessary.

CONCLUSION: DESIGN ETHNOGRAPHY ALTERING THE CLIENT – WEB DESIGNER RELATIONSHIP

Design ethnography sits within the environment of both the nonprofit organization and web design system, being gradually adapted as more knowledge is gained about the methodology. Above I have outlined how design ethnography is currently working in the web design and nonprofit system and possibilities for a positive impact for both. Thus, what design ethnography does for the client – web designer relationship is enhance the ability for the two systems to communicate at a higher level of understanding.

Luhmann begins his clarification of communication with an important distinction between the oft used “transmission”: “The metaphor of transmission is unusable...it suggests that the sender gives up something that the receiver then acquires” (1995 [1984]: 139). This incorrect metaphor continues to reveal the importance of the utterance in communication. An utterance must be picked up and processed if it is to be communicated. Transmission only requires its message be sent. Therefore, if transmission forgets about its message once gone, communication requires a response and the affirmation of the message. Design ethnography better allows for this process of communication because it places values on all actants within the process. No longer does the web designer simply

note a few client desires and hand over a website. Now a network of stronger alliances are created because the web designer and nonprofit create relations not solely based on the functionality of the website, but the process of collaboration and understanding how to best reach the site's end-user. In other words, through design ethnography, a positive relationship is not simply based on a successful or broken piece of technology, but rather, can be broken or made at any point in the web design process.