

# 'Thick description' and design

The background of the slide features a faint, light-colored version of Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian Man. The figure is centered within a square and a circle, with arms and legs extended to touch the boundaries. The text is overlaid on this image.

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# Outline

- Human-centred design — Revisiting some basic issues and history
- Thick description - Where did the term comes from? What does it mean? Why should it matter?
- Seeing the world ethnomethodologically
- The native's point of view — Case studies of practitioner expertise and designing 'smart' knowledge systems
- Human centred design and ethnography redux
- Reconfiguring design ethnography

# Three waves of HCI

0. Practice-based research  
(research through design)



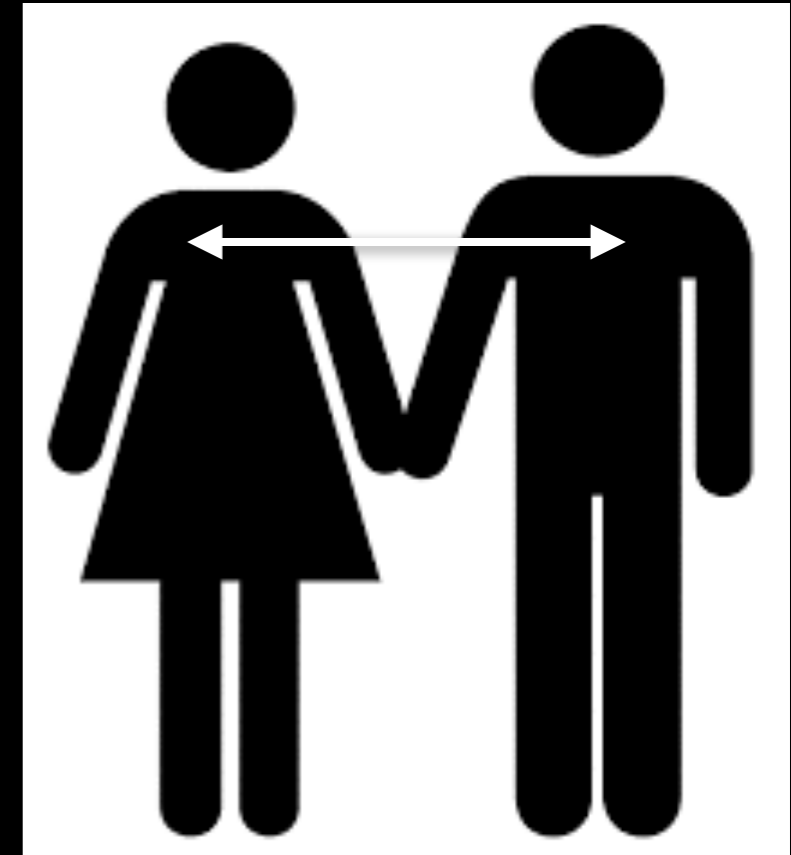
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1. Dominance of cognitive science  
(modelling devices, users and  
interactions; research *for* design)



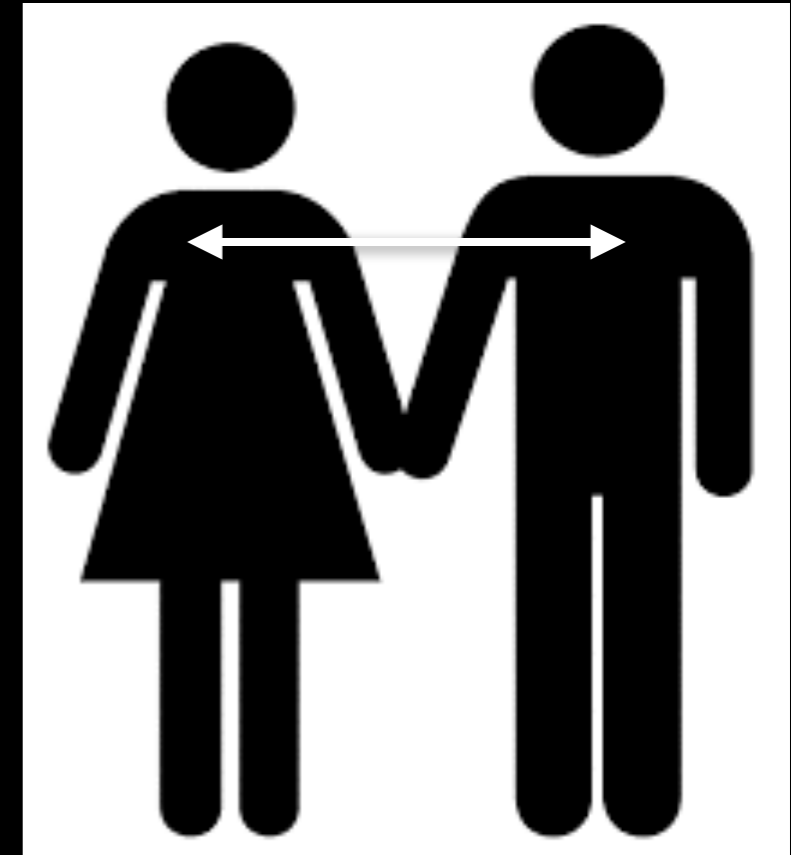
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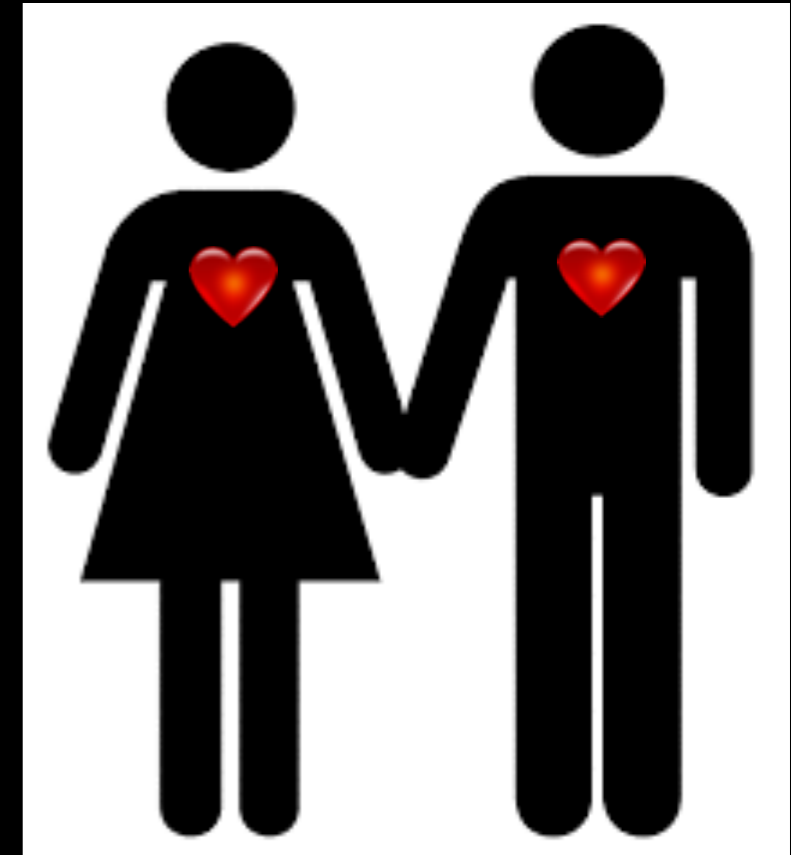
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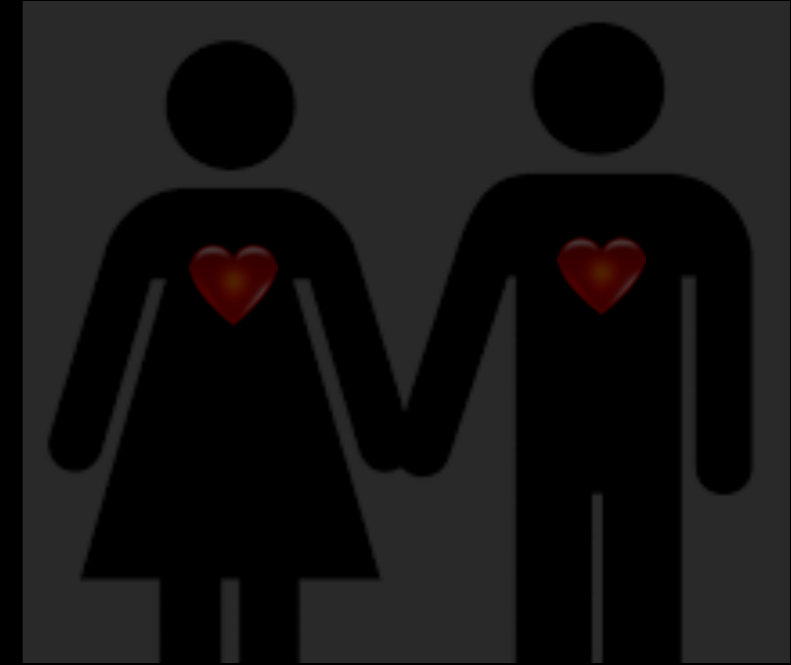
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(ethnomethodology prominent)
3. **Affective psychology**  
(user experience, interest in 'critical design', influenced decisively by the arts and humanities, 'anything goes')



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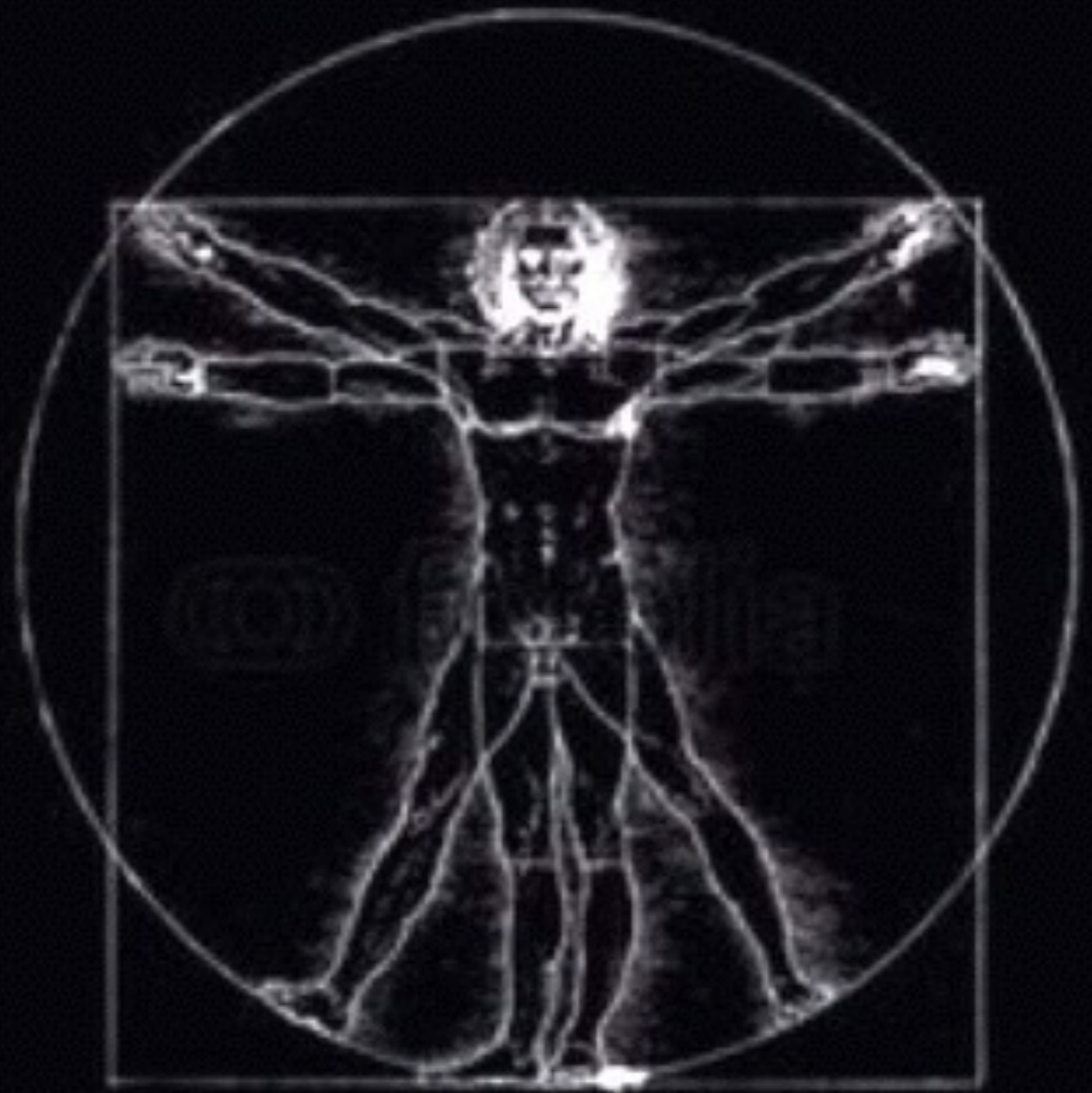
## Worksites ⇨ Everywhere

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# Human ('user') centred design

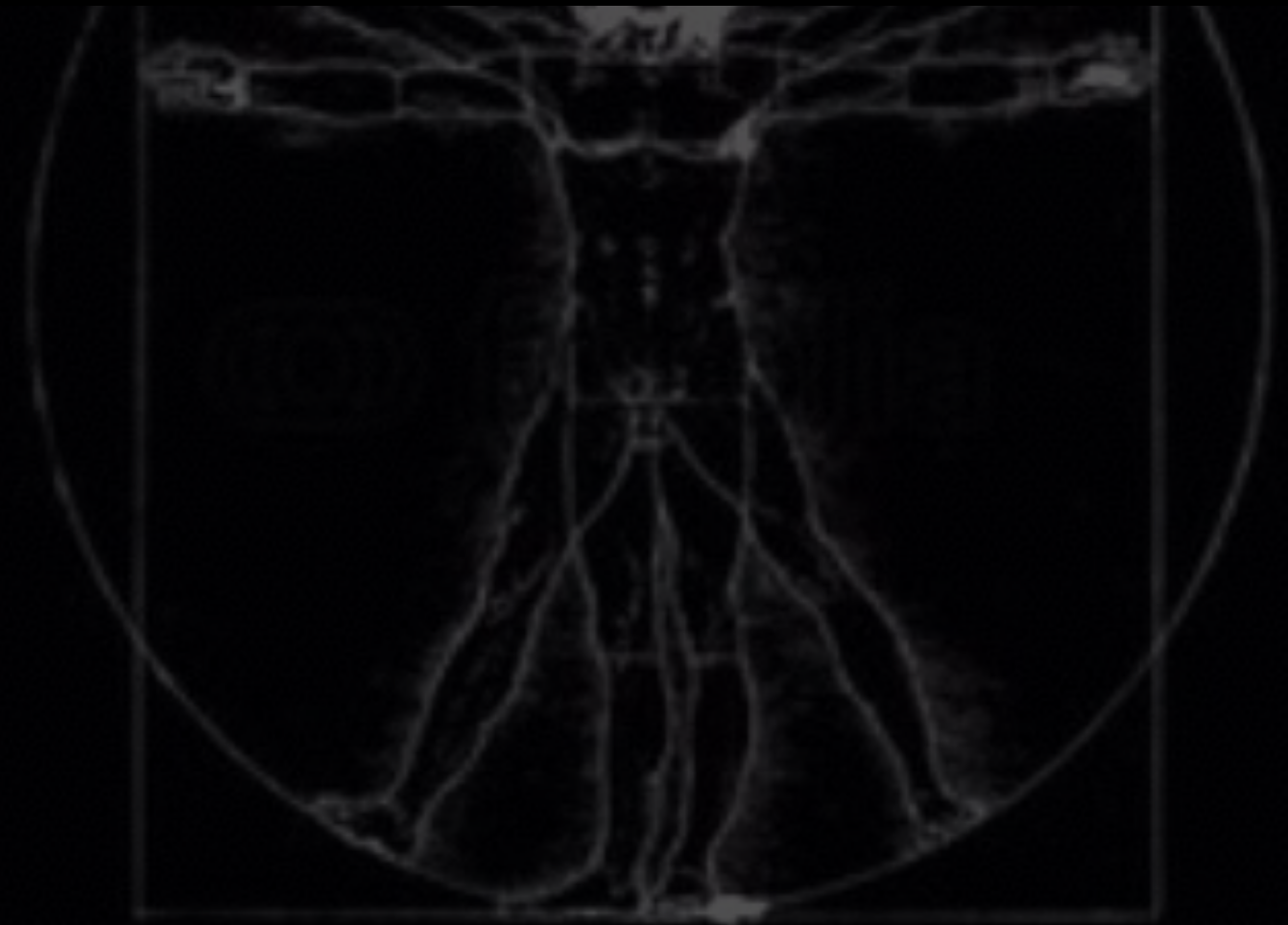
- If humans are the focus, the centre of attention — How can we truly 'understand' them (their behaviour, feelings, thoughts, needs, ...?)



# Human ('user') centred design

## 'Interpreting' humans

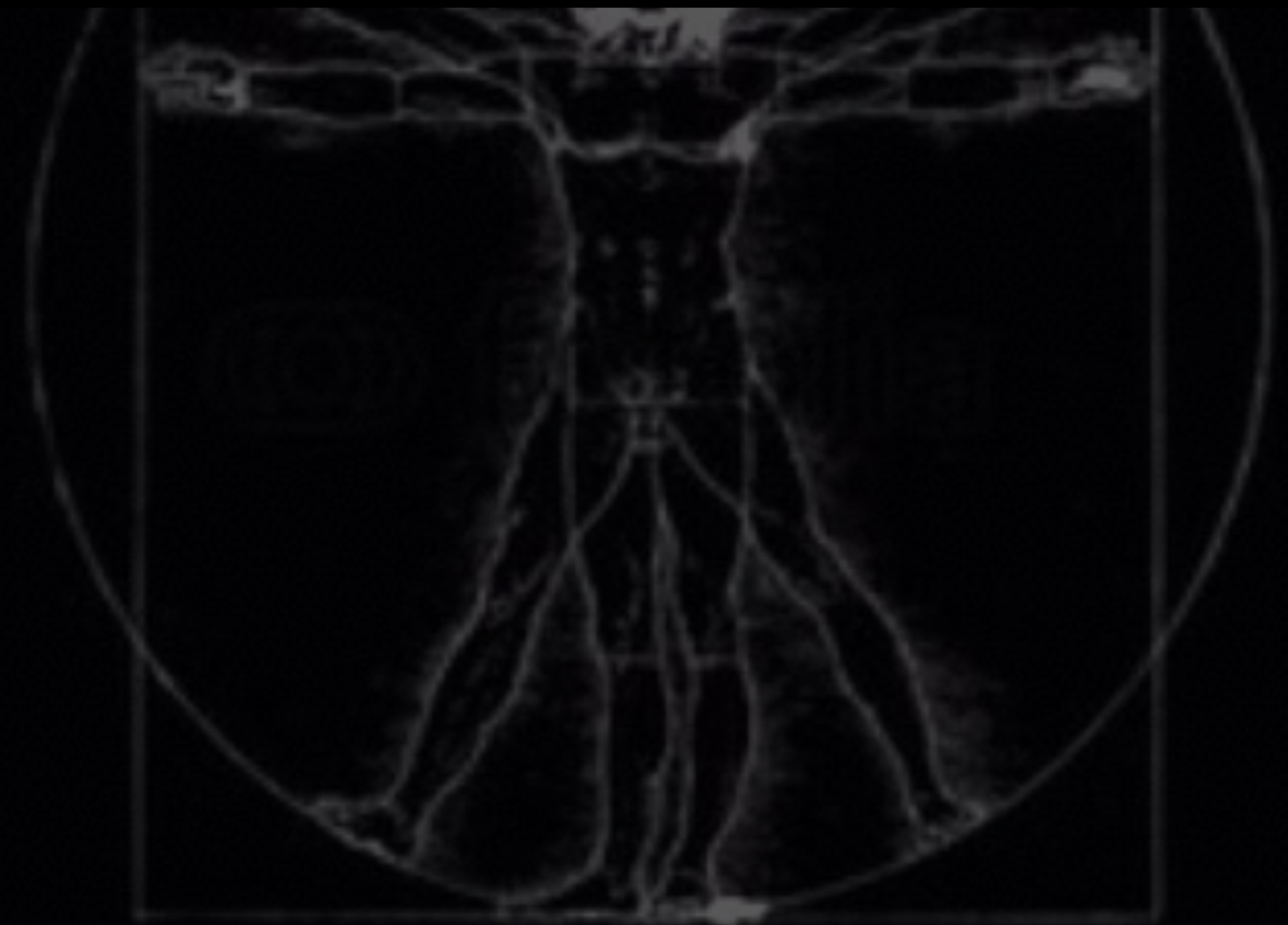
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# Human ('user') centred design

## 'Interpreting' cultures

of attention —  
How can we truly  
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# Human ('user') centred design

## 'Interpreting' cultures

Taking a turn to the social is by no means a straightforward matter however, not least because of the vast array of competing accounts or descriptions as to how human activities are socially organised in the actions and interactions of people. Simply put, the problem in turning to the social is one of describing the sociality of conduct in an adequate fashion. **This is not simply a sociological problem but one that goes to the heart of design as it follows that inadequate descriptions of practical conduct – of work – in which systems are to be embedded can but result in inadequate designs.** Designs that is, which are not particularly responsive to the actual circumstances of their use.

(Crabtree, Wild Sociology: Ethnography and Design, 2001)

Thick description

# Thick description

- Where does the term come from?
  - Gilbert Ryle — ‘The Thinking of Thoughts: What is *Le Penseur* Doing?’ and ‘Thinking and Reflecting’ (1968)
  - Clifford Geertz — *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973)

# Thick description

- What does it mean? **Ryle**...
  - ▶ Blinks (involuntary twitches) and winks ... and parodies of winks, and rehearsals of parodies of winks
  - ▶ **Thin** description of the rehearser: 'rapidly contracting his right eyelid'
  - ▶ **Thick** description of the rehearser: 'practicing a burlesque of a friend faking a wink to deceive an innocent into thinking a conspiracy is in motion'

# Thick description

- What does it mean? **Geertz...**
  - ▶ Cultural analysis is an **interpretative, decoding** practice
  - ▶ The raw observational material collected by an ethnographer is too **thin**,
  - ▶ Our detailed, layered interpretations of local (situated) happenings make up thick description
  - ▶ But the thickest of descriptions can still only be based on what the locals tell (instruct) us



# Thick description

- What does it mean?

- ▶ Cultural analysis is an practice

‘what we call our data are really our own constructions of other people’s constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to’

The native’s point of view?

# Thick description

- What does it mean?

- ▶ Cultural analysis is an  
practice

**‘most of what we need to comprehend a particular event, ritual, custom, idea or whatever is insinuated as background information before the thing itself is directly examined’**

(situated) happenings make up thick description

- ▶ B

based on what the locals tell (instruct) us

# Thick description

- What does it mean?

- ▶ Cultural analysis is an *practice*

‘most of what we need to comprehend a particular event, ritual, custom, idea or whatever is insinuated as background information before the thing itself is directly examined’

*(situated) happenings make up thick description*

What everyone knows...  
commonsense knowledge

Understanding  
commonsense knowledge

# Seeing the world ethnomethodologically

ethno

‘the people’ –  
members of a  
culture/collectivity

methodology

their methods  
(of practical reasoning  
and action, their ‘practical  
sociology’)

Ethnomethodology =  
the study of members’ methods

# Seeing the world ethnomethodologically

- Studying the ‘work’ of any setting’s members to accomplish the naturally occurring activities in which they are involved – that is, the work of being anyone, doing anything (not necessarily paid labour)
- Derives from Harvey Sacks’ reflections on doing ‘Being Ordinary’:

*No matter how mundane and familiar our activities might be, it takes practical effort on our behalf, and on that of the others involved too, to make them happen*

# Seeing the world ethnomethodologically

- Studying the 'work' of any setting's members to accomplish the naturally occurring activities in which

**The phenomenon:**

**The 'achieved ordinariness' of our**

- **social world**

*No matter how mundane and familiar our activities might be, it takes practical effort on our behalf, and on that of the others involved too, to make them happen*

# Seeing the world ethnomethodologically

- Any setting's work is 'naturally accountable'
  - The members of a setting can see the work that is going on around them ... and know what it is that they and the other parties to the work are doing
  - Members can unproblematically offer a natural account of what they can see and what they are doing that others will recognise too



# Seeing the world ethnomethodologically

The upshot:

In doing their work members display for others what it is they are doing...

and by making visible what they are doing, others can see and recognise what is being done and can then coordinate their actions accordingly

**an (observable) 'architecture of intersubjectivity'**

# Seeing the world ethnomethodologically

- Any setting's work is 'naturally accountable'  
Hunting the animal in the foliage:  
How is something – actions, activities, identities, places, objects, etc – visibly (accountably) done, recognisably what it 'is' / what 'everyone around here knows'?  
Members can unproblematically offer a natural account of what they can see and what they are doing that others will recognise too

# Ethnomethodological thick description

- Descriptive accounts (inscriptions) that **make instructably observable the work of a setting** and its accountable organisation for the members who do it
- These accounts rely on the **development of a members' competence** in a setting's work
- Plainly, analysis is not something that happens after fieldwork, but runs through it

# Ethnomethodologically informed research and design

- Large scale document production (Pycock et al, 1998)
- Ethnographically-informed systems design for air traffic control (Bentley et al, 1992)

Collections of papers and reports on ethnomethodologically informed ethnography —

Paul Luff, Jon Hindmarsh and Christian Heath (eds.) 2000. Workplace Studies: Recovering Work Practice and Informing System Design.

Richard Harper (ed.) 2011. The Connected Home: The Future of Domestic Life

Margaret Szymanski and Jack Whalen (eds.) 2011. Making Work Visible: Ethnographically Grounded Case Studies of Work Practice.

# Ethnography and 'implications for design'

*(T)he 'implications for design' approach...involves a reading of **ethnography as purely methodological**, and by the same token, as equivalent to other empirical approaches..., to be selectively deployed as needed. The ethnographer, in this view, is a passive instrument, a lens through which a specimen setting might be examined, with the ethnography providing an objective representation of that setting. **What is missed is the extent that ethnography is always, inherently, a perspectival view**, and that this perspectival quality is critical to what ethnography is.*

(Dourish, Implications for design, 544)

# Ethnography and 'implications for design'

*(T)he 'implications for design' approach...involves a reading of*

**Reading ethnographic inquiry too narrowly,  
constraining ethnographic studies in ways that fail  
to do justice to the kinds of insights that they can  
provide**

*is missed is the extent that ethnography is always,  
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# Ethnography and 'implications for design'

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**But to be honest, ethnomethodological inquiries on system design and work have produced more critiques, programmatic analyses, and research reports than successful designs.**

*is missed is the extent that ethnography is always, inherently, a perspectival view  
quality is critical to what ethnography is.*

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# Ethnography and 'implications for design'

*(T)he 'implications for design' approach...involves a reading of same token, as equivalent to other empirical approaches....*

***And note: Not all ethnographic inquiry is ethnomethodological in its orientation!***

*providing an objective representation of that setting. is missed is the extent that ethnography is always, inherently, a perspectival view quality is critical to what ethnography is.*

*(Dourish, Implications for design, 544)*



The native's point of view:  
Practitioner 'expertise'

# Ethnomethodology's 'unique adequacy criteria'

- The ideal: **Learn to be a competent practitioner / member**
- The practicality: With the practices of specialized populations and work communities, this can be quite difficult
- The result: 'Hybrid studies'
  - "Done by outsiders who are also insiders ... who have as their aim that practitioners in the specialty area being studied will be as interested in the studies as professional sociologists."\*

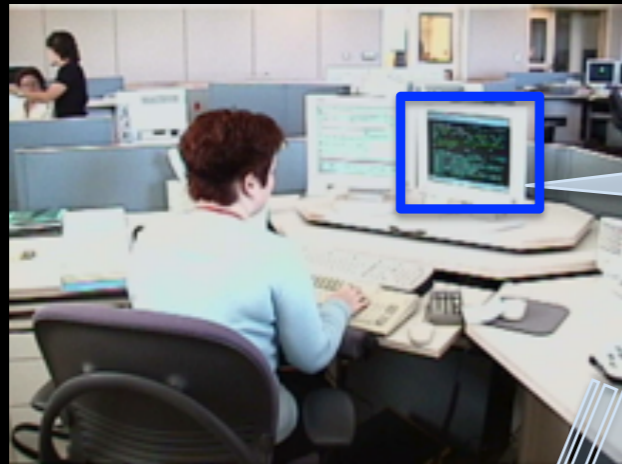
\*Anne Warfield Rawls, 'Editors Introduction' to Harold Garfinkel, *Ethnomethodology's Program: Working Out Durkheim's Aphorism*

# Ethnomethodology's 'unique adequacy criteria'

- The ideal: **Learn to be a competent practitioner / member**



# The setting: Emergency communications



```
INC: 102302          TY: 1  
LOC: BRIDGE WASHINGTON  
PHO: 8              X:      PH ADR:  
SRC: 62             XST: 7TH  
BREATH:             CONSC:  AGE:      SEX:  AGYS:  
CALLER:             CONT:  
ADR:                FIG  
DTL: C/ADUI A 4 YR CHILD IS WALKING SB ON THE  
IS FOLLOWING THE CHILD  
REC:                SLD  
Data entry error  
PM 4:01:47  
UN/OF:
```



# Expert systems vs systems for experts

4656 BARGER, EUG	
C1	
M4	
M9	
M5	
7	
8	
T8	
4	
9	
2	
T1	
1	
3	
5	

Paper run sheets

4656 BARGER, EUG		RESPONSE UNIT STATUS AT 21:53			
RES	UNIT	STA	LOCATION		
BC	C1			2	2
MED	M4	DSP	3435 ECHO HOLLOW	2	T1
MED	M9			3	1
MED	M5			3	3
1	7			3	5
1	8	DSP	3435 ECHO HOLLOW		
1	T8				
2	4	ENR	QTRS		
2	9	ARV	EGF-5		

CAD dispatch screen

# Expert systems vs systems for experts

4656 BARGER, EUG	
C1	Battalion chief
M4	Medic units
M9	
M5	
7	1st alarm
8	
T8	
4	2nd alarm
9	
2	
T1	
1	3rd alarm
3	
5	

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<b>1</b>	<b>7</b>			3	5
<b>1</b>	<b>8</b>	DSP	3435 ECHO HOLLOW		
<b>1</b>	<b>T8</b>				
2	4	ENR	QTRS		
2	9	ARV	EGF-5		

Run sheets for every address listed  
response groups – closest available principle

Separate notepad & pen used to record and track status & location

Response group for complete first alarm (chief, medic, engines + truck) noted on screen by **BOLDFACE**

Each unit's current status and location listed under STA and LOCATION, respectively

# Expert systems vs systems for experts

4656 BARGER, EUG
C1
M4
M9
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2
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3
5

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2	9	ARV	EGF-5				

Old 'manual' system

4656 BARGER, EUG				RESPONSE UNIT STATUS AT 21:53			
RES	UNIT	STA	LOCATION				
REC	7						
REC	4	ENR	QTRS				
REC	T8						
REC	CO						
REC	M9						

New, semi-automated expert system – dependent on incident code entered by call-taker



# Expert systems vs systems for experts

4656 BARGER, EUG                      RESPONSE UNIT STATUS AT 21:53

RES	UNIT	STA	LOCATION				
BC	C1			2	2		
MED	M4	DSP	3435 ECHO HOLLOW	2	T1		
MED	M9			3	1		
MED	M5			3	3		
1	7			3	5		
1	8	DSP	3435 ECHO HOLLOW				
1	T8						
2	4	ENR	QTRS				
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Old 'manual' system

## Machine-as-prosthesis

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REC	7						
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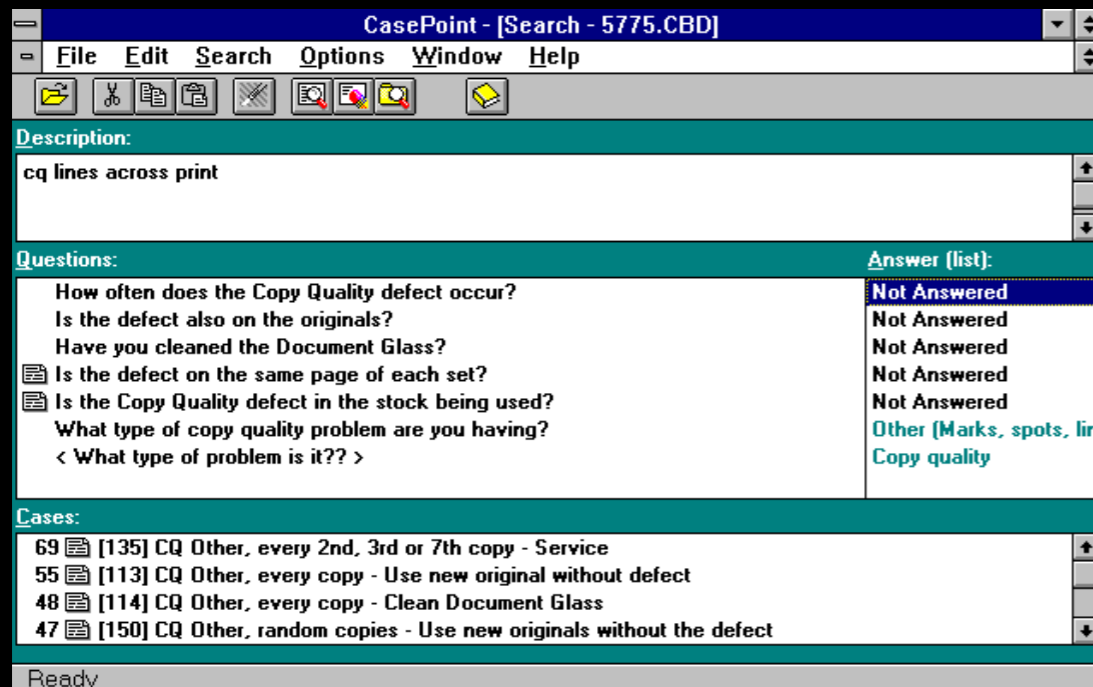
# 'Smart' call centres?

- 'Smart' technology (that could perhaps replace human expertise with machine intelligence) was considered a key enabler by Xerox management
- In the customer service organisation, they were already employing an expert system, called Case-Point, to diagnose document machine problems over the phone...
- and, if possible, instruct callers in fixing the problem

# 'Smart' call centres?

## The business case

- Every service problem solved over the phone saves Xerox \$396
- Other reasons given for using an expert system



- ▶ High employee turnover makes it costly to train reps about document machine operation (xerography)
- ▶ Case-Point could be used by novices

# 'Smart' call centres?

How it is supposed to work

The screenshot shows a software window titled "CasePoint - [Search - D...]" with a menu bar (File, Edit, Search, Options, Window, Help) and a toolbar. The main content area is divided into several sections:

- Description:** "cq fine line on prints/ same as before/pr belt" (circled in blue)
- Questions:** "What type of copy quality problem are you having? < What type of problem is it?? >" (circled in blue)
- Answer (list):** A table with two rows: "Not Answered" and "Copy quality" (circled in blue)
- Actions:** "52 Place a service call." and "47 Create a log and escalate..." (circled in blue)

Annotations in blue boxes with lines pointing to the interface:

- "Description provided by the call taker" points to the Description field.
- "Answers" points to the Answer (list) table.
- "A list of questions associated with the top case" points to the Questions field.
- "The most likely cases given the answers thus far" points to the Actions field.

The status bar at the bottom left shows "Ready".

# 'Smart' call centres?



To get to the right diagnosis:

1. The customer's description must match (somewhat) the rep's description of the case
2. The rep must ask all the questions
3. The customer must give truthful answers
4. The rep must select the correct answers

Ready

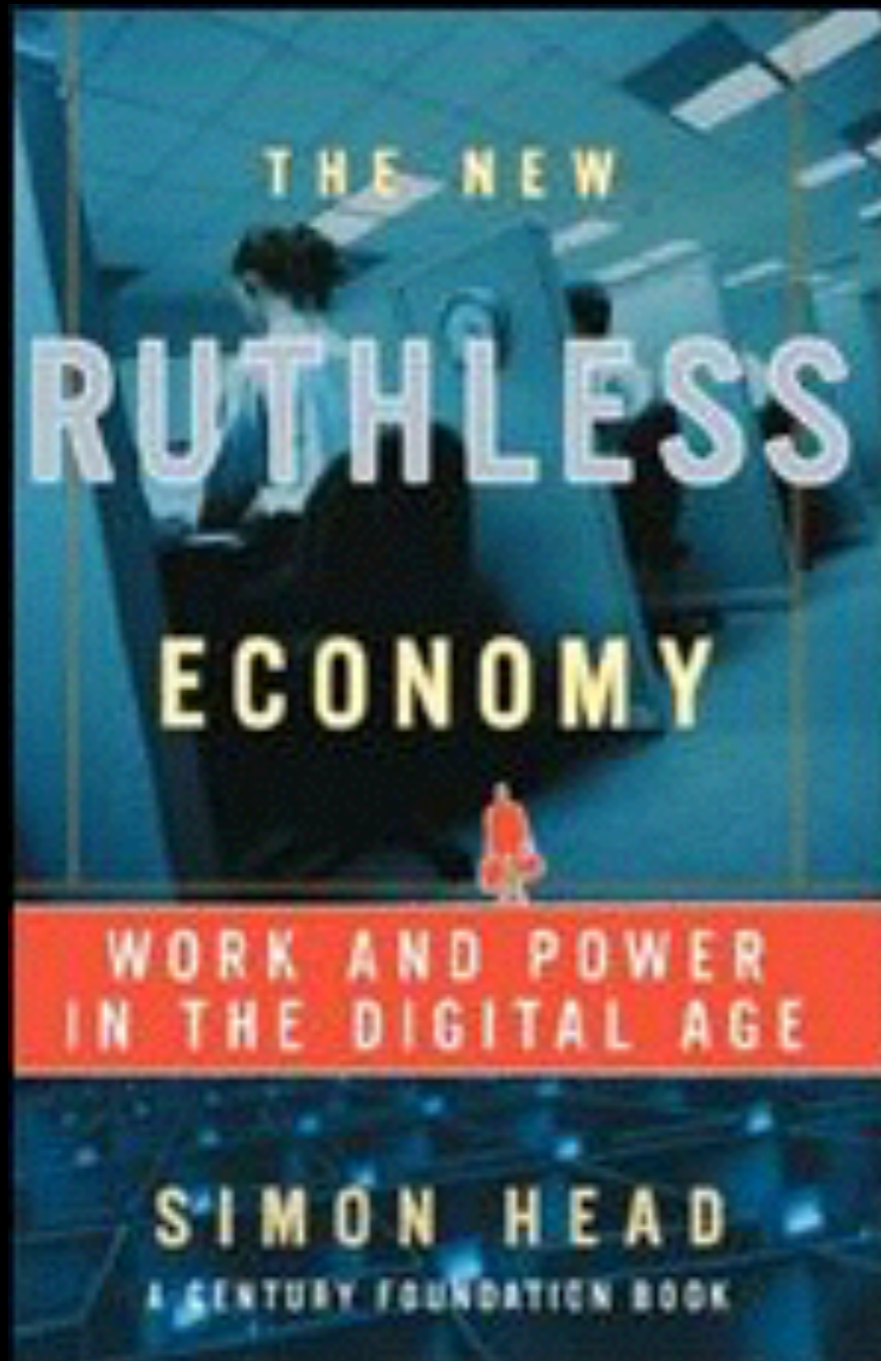
# Case-Point in the real world



# Expert systems vs systems for experts



# Communal knowledge, expertise and information technology





# The Eureka story

- Eureka's origins as an AI project:  
Developing an expert system to help technicians diagnose and fix machines (machine-as-prosthesis)
- Why this was wrong, and how we learned this...
- Observing everyday practice:  
inventiveness in the field  
and local/indigenous knowledge-sharing
- Honouring and building on  
these practices to create Eureka...

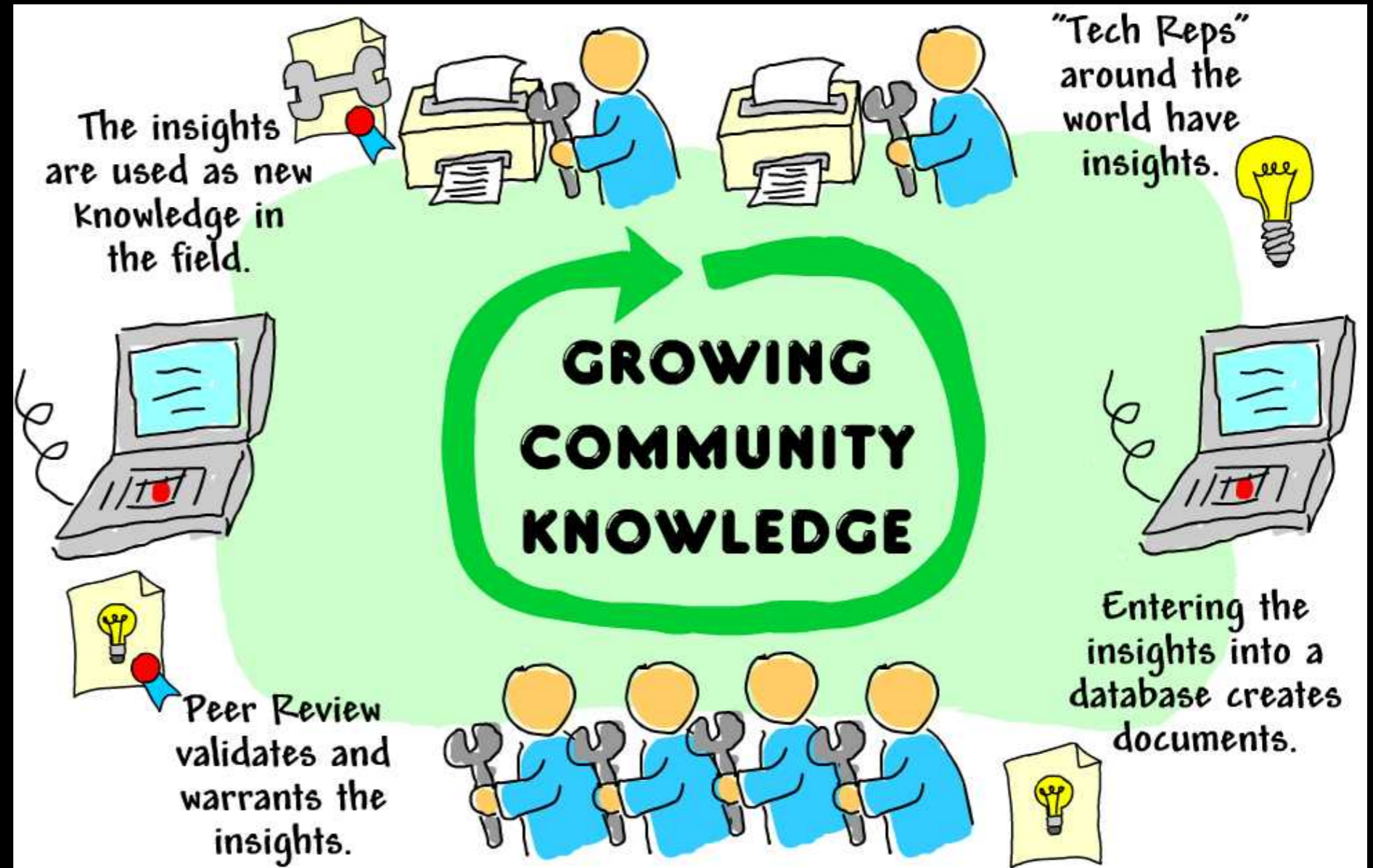


# The Eureka story

- **Necessity is the mother of invention**
  - Technicians frequently invent new solutions, keep ‘crib sheets’ of solutions to jog their memories, share war stories with their local work groups
- We realised we could build on these communal practices — we could **turn AI on its head**, with the work community becoming the ‘expert system’
- We also realised we had to **co-design the system** with them — as well as provide for control over the system by the technician community ... but this had never been done before in Xerox

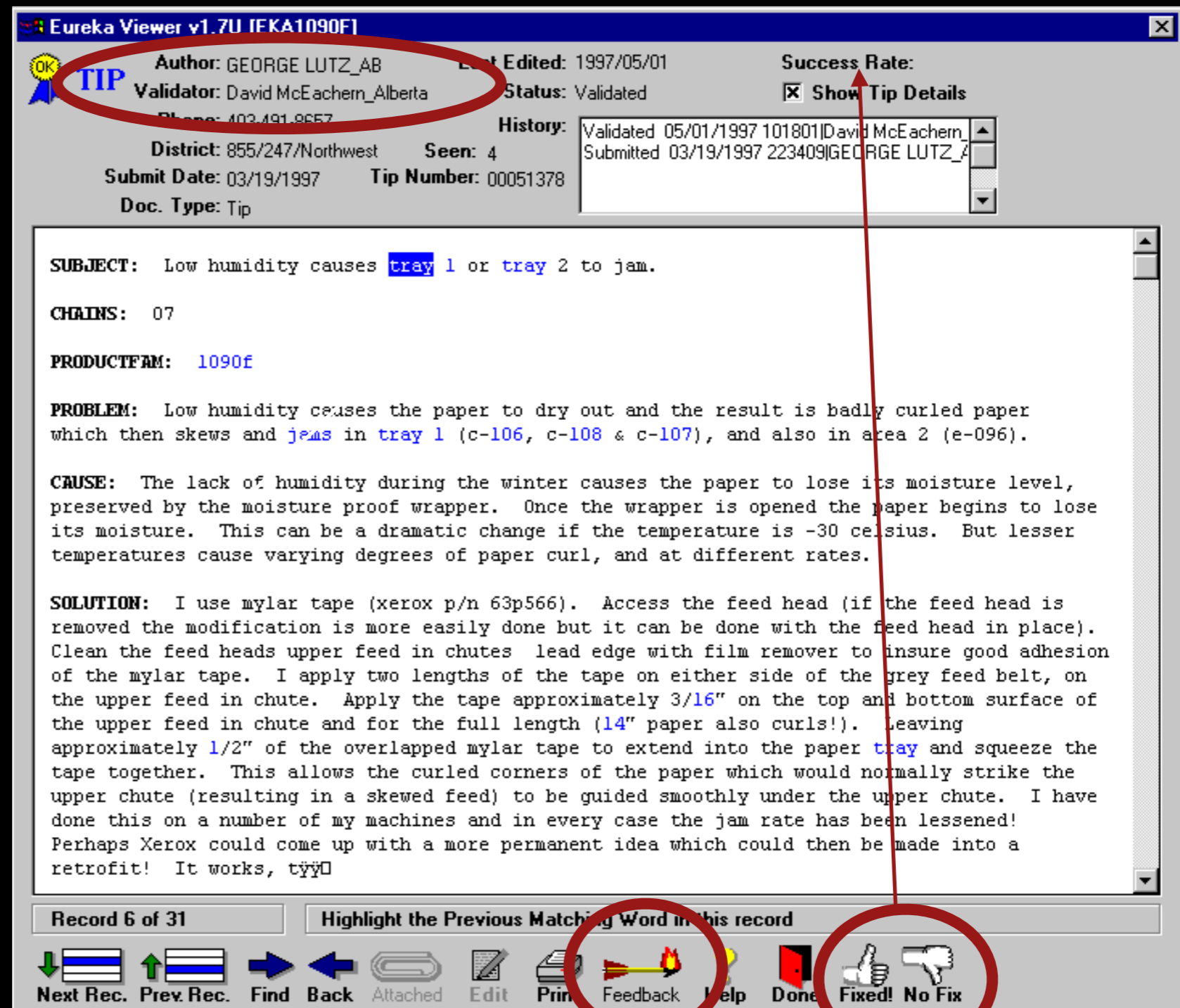
# The Eureka story

The  
concept



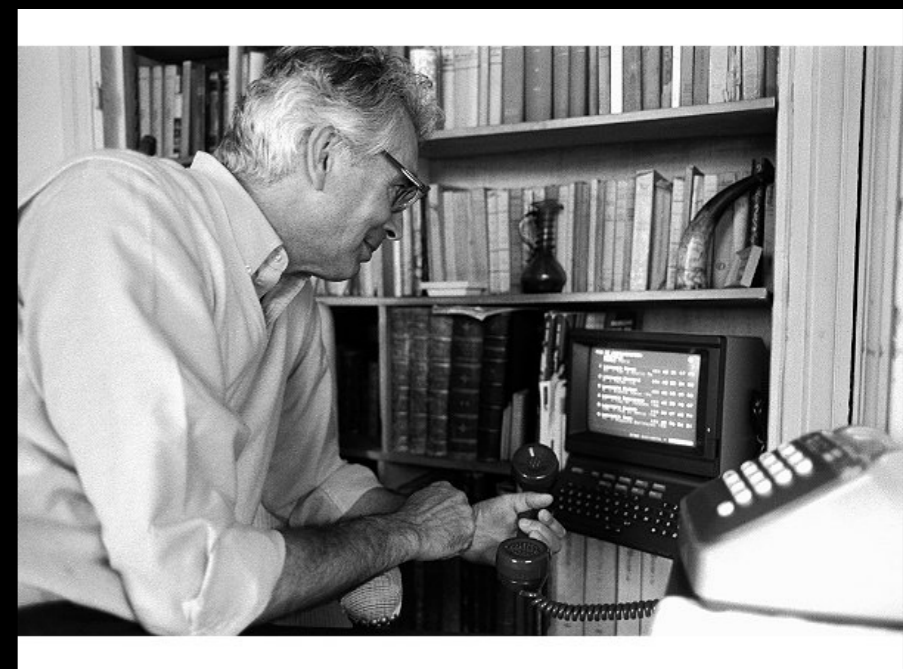
# The Eureka story

## The concept



# The Eureka story

- Engaging the technician community
  - We started in France ... they had the worst service performance and both management and the field technicians were open to change
  - Field experiments with laptops ... and then national implementation on French Telecom's Minitel system



# The Eureka story

- Engaging the technician community
  - Quebecois technicians had learned of the French results and reached out to us, which led to co-designing a very simple 'community server-laptop client' system for Quebec...
  - with a participatory deployment strategy across the country led by Eureka leaders from Quebec



# The Eureka story

## The battle for America

- Management reaction in the USA to the whole idea of Eureka was very negative, regardless of what had happened in France and Canada
  - They believed that 'quality service' depended on good documentation – the repair analysis procedures (RAPs) in the manual, written by engineers who designed the machines – and technicians should simply follow the RAPs
  - Technicians need not – and should not! – invent their own solutions ('We don't want them to be cowboys!')

# The Eureka story

## The battle for America

- We turned to guerrilla methods (and relationships we had built in the field) to engage the technician community across the USA and spread Eureka in the field
- After three years of struggle, there were so many technicians promoting Eureka that Xerox management had to listen ... but it was a purely technical feature of the system (and not its socio-technical value) that finally led them to concede



# The Eureka story

What's in a  
Eureka tip?

- Diagnosing unusual, costly failures
- Workarounds
- Easing the job
- Comments on official documentation
- And pretty much any other information that technicians believe could be helpful

# The Eureka story

The screenshot shows a web browser window displaying a technical document. The document title is "07-06 Fault - Replaced Nip Clutches". The author is "GV: MAD:ROCH811SD" and the validator is "Denis Cadieux\_Que". The document is validated and has a submit date of 10/30/1996. The product is "1050f" and the problem is "07-06 Fault, replaced the Nip Clutches, and entire Elevator Module with no change." The solution section, which is circled in red, describes the issue and provides steps to resolve it.

**07-06 Fault - Replaced Nip Clutches**  
Author: GV: MAD:ROCH811SD  
Validator: Denis Cadieux\_Que  
Success:  Show details

Author Phone: 514-336-9524  
Author Org.: Dorval  
Doc. Type: Dsr  
History: Validated 1996/10/01  
Doc. #: 00015119  
Status: Validated  
Submit Date: 10/30/1996  
Last Edited: 1996/10/01

Product: **1050f**  
Chains: 07

**Problem:**  
(Applies to 1050)  
07-06 Fault, replaced the Nip Clutches, and entire Elevator Module with no change.

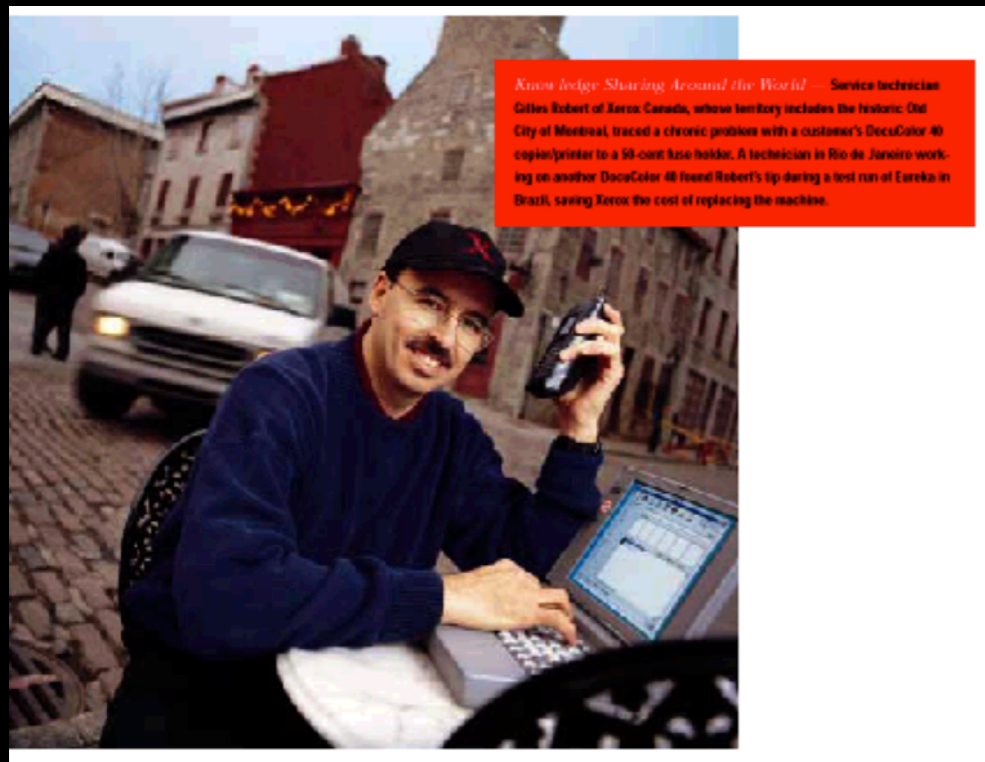
**Cause:**

**Solution:**  
The right hand tray release tab was bent towards the left.  
- Remove Xero (Xerographic) Module, Vacuum Transport and **Fuser** Module to see point of contact.  
- Bend latch on Elevator Assy (Assembly)

- Diagnosing unusual, costly failures
- **Workarounds**
- Easing the job
- Comments on official documentation
- And pretty much any other information that technicians believe could be helpful

# The Eureka story

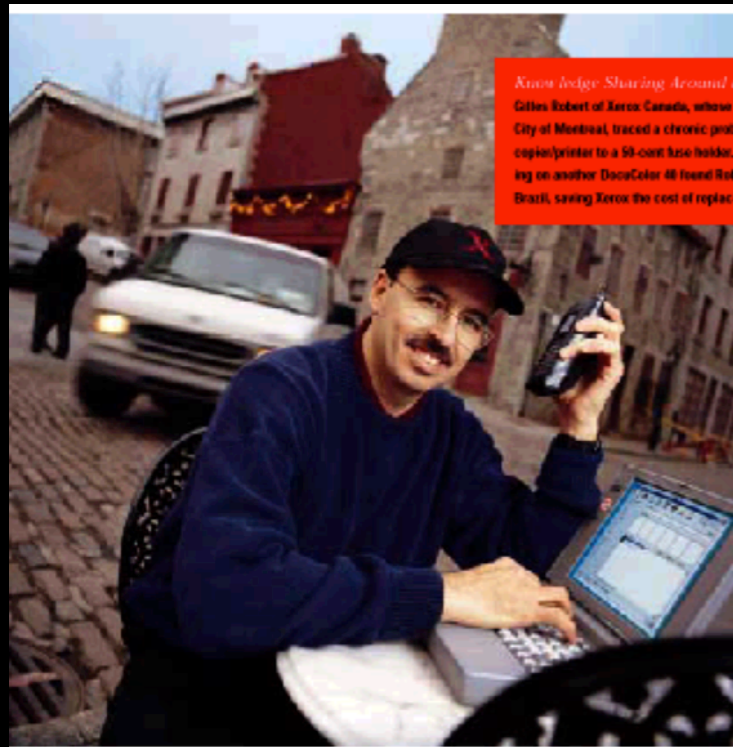
## Eureka results




- Over 15,000 technicians around the world were using the system...
- to solve over 750,000 problems each year (and this does not take into account the communal learning benefits)...
- for an annual savings to Xerox of \$15M

# The Eureka story

## Eureka results



*Knowledge Sharing Around the World* — Service technician Gilles Robert of Xerox Canada, whose territory includes the historic Old City of Montreal, traced a chronic problem with a customer's DocuColor 40 copier/printer to a 5V-cant fuse holder. A technician in Rio de Janeiro working on another DocuColor 40 found Robert's tip during a test run of Eureka in Brazil, saving Xerox the cost of replacing the machine.

 **3-396 VSEL Communication Fail**

Author: Gilles Robert\_que  
Validator: Marc Beauregard\_que.

Success:  Show details  
Chains: 03

Product: **dc40**

Problem:

Printer declared 03-396 fault always at the start of a print job and never in the middle of the job.

Cause:

Fault : 03-396

Video selector marking control PWB detected a read/write fault of the XPC register on the **VSEL** . We changed the 2 video PWB's and the 2 ribbon cables between the video and the marking boards. We returned the next day and changed the marking board . Still the customer had intermittent 03-396 codes.

The customer had done did a lot of renovations in their offices and we found dust in the dc40.

Solution:

THIS SAVED US A LIKE FOR LIKE **[\$40,000]**

The 5 volt line for the 2 **VSEL** PWB'S was the problem. There was a bad contact in the inline fuse in the 5 volt line. The 5 volts comes from the IIT LVPS . The problem is that between PJ782 pin 1 and 3 and the 2 **VSEL** PWB you have 2 inline fuses there and the 2 fuses were resistive and gave a bad 5 volt to the **VSEL** PWB. We cleaned the fuse contacts of the fuses and the problem never reappeared

See attachment for the BSD.

# Research through design

## Community

### Who?

- Boundaries
- Membership
- Subgroups
- Neighbors

### Where?

- Location
- Proximity
- Role of comm tech

## Knowledge

### What?

- Valued knowledge
- Kinds or forms
- Natural categories

### Why?

- Sharing
- Kinds shared
- Motivations

## Sharing

### How?

- Routines
- Stories, requests
- Tech mediation
- Tech integration

### When?

- Conditions
- Times
- Events

# Research through design

## Building Community Knowledge Systems

How much of the Eureka story can be generalized to other organizations that want a similar, socio-technical system for knowledge creation and sharing? Answering these questions can help build such a system.

### Community: Who and Where

- **Who are the members of the work community?** Shared identity and practices define "community." Because members share practices, communication between them can draw on background understanding or knowledge that doesn't have to be explicitly stated. It is easier to build a knowledge-sharing system based in community life that stays within the community than one that crosses distinct boundaries. Moreover, community membership is the basis for trust, and effective knowledge sharing depends on trusted information. In the case of Eureka, technicians write tips for other technicians, so the information is not only understandable in context but also trustworthy.
- **Do members work in close proximity to each other?** Working shoulder to shoulder supports continuous apprenticeship learning in which people can share knowledge that has not yet been articulated and documented. For people working primarily in separate locations, documents are especially important for sharing and learning. Moreover, when a community is large, documents help scale knowledge more rapidly across numbers, time, and distance. For example, Xerox service technicians spend most of their time alone in the field at customer sites. Extensive community knowledge sharing requires digital documents that they can read on a laptop.

### Knowledge: What and Why

- **What constitutes valuable knowledge for the community?** Observation of how people do their work will reveal what kind of information they most often share because they value it. For example, we saw that technicians valued not only diagnostic tips but also hints about making certain tasks easier and corrections or improvements to documentation.
- **Why do members share particular kinds of knowledge?** Understanding the motivations for sharing is important for grasping the natural incentives within the community. Successful knowledge-sharing systems should build on this structure. External rewards can encourage sharing,

but there may be a danger in assuming that financial payoff is a naturally effective way to get quality information and participation. The service technicians felt that getting their job done more effectively and building a reputation for competence was a significant incentive.

### Sharing: How and When

- **How does sharing occur in the community every day?** An effective knowledge-sharing system should honor natural sharing practices and the style people follow to exchange information, seek and give advice, and otherwise support each other. Service technicians tell stories of particular machines and their problems to share their learning and experience. The style of the tips, although they are written documents, tends to follow this narrative structure.
- **In what different work contexts does sharing commonly occur?** When a technician finds a particularly recalcitrant problem, he or she will tell the story at the next work-group meeting. This volunteering is often "just in time," because when a problem crops up in one machine, it may come up in others. On the other hand, when people come to the group to help, they bring up old stories. Then they use the story to suggest possible unexpected linkages between symptom and cause.

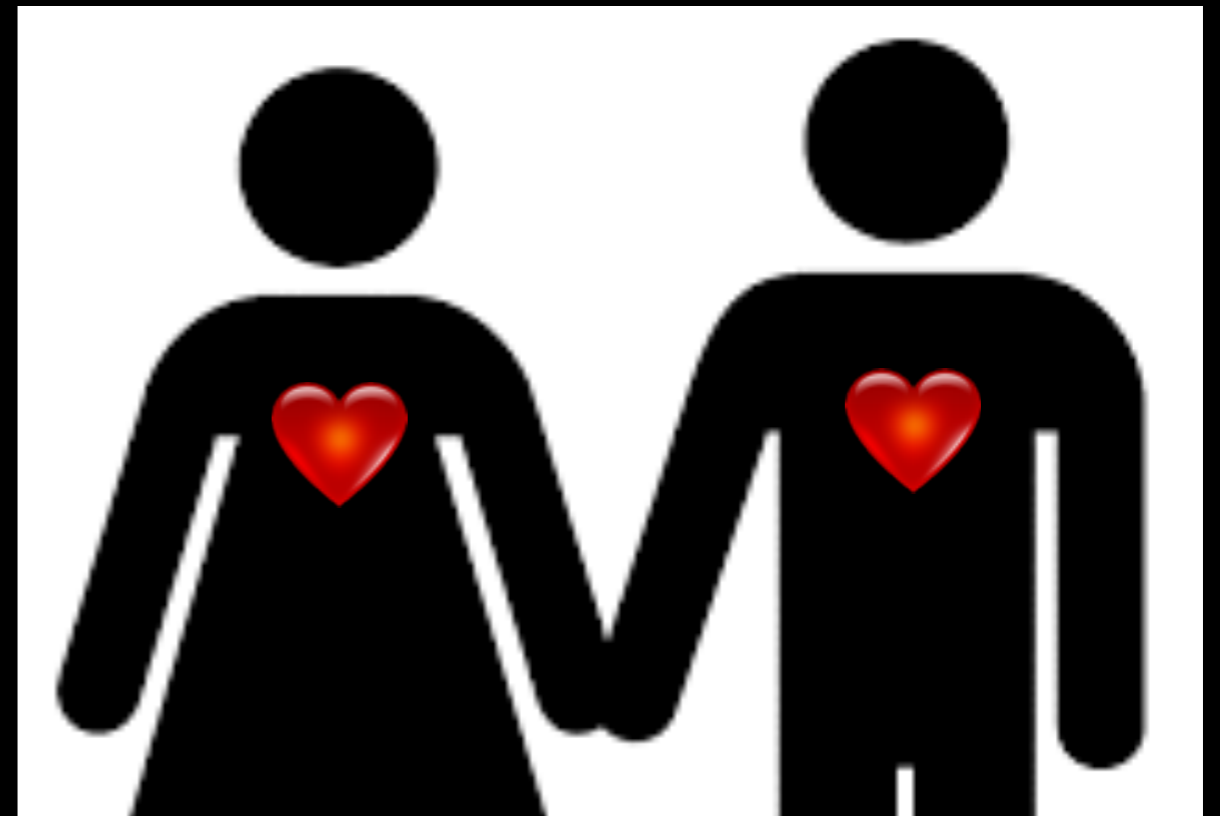
### Implementation: What and How

- **What constitutes effective technological support for work practice?** Our experience strongly suggests the value of bringing a prototype to a pilot group in a community for participatory design and rapid turnaround in response to suggestions. The initial prototype provides something to which community members can react, which can indicate how the technology should change. Inventive community members will use the technology fruitfully in unexpected ways.
- **How can people learn the new system?** Learning to share knowledge involves learning what is valued, how to express it, how to find the knowledge, as well as learning about the technology per se. It is also involves having the incentive in the right context for learning. Learning should become a common, everyday activity in using the system, rather than an initial training activity separated from the work.

# Human centred design and ethnography (redux)

# Human ('user') centred design

- If humans are the focus, the centre of attention —  
How can we truly 'understand' them (their behaviour, feelings, thoughts, needs, ...?)



**The turn to the arts**





# Human ('user') centred design

## Ethnography Considered Harmful

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### ABSTRACT

We review the current status of ethnography in systems design. We focus particularly on new approaches to and understandings of ethnography that have emerged as the computer has moved out of the workplace. These seek to implement a different order of ethnographic study to that which has largely been employed in design to date. In doing so they reconfigure the relationship ethnography has to systems design, replacing detailed empirical studies of situated action with studies that provide cultural interpretations of action and critiques of the design process itself. We hold these new approaches to and understandings of ethnography in design up to scrutiny, with the purpose of enabling designers to appreciate the differences between new and existing approaches to ethnography in systems design and the practical implications this might have for design.

### Author Keywords

Ethnography, ethnomethodology, systems design.

### ACM Classification Keywords

J.4 Social and Behavioural Sciences: Sociology.

### INTRODUCTION

The title of this paper reflects a long tradition in systems design. It is succinctly summed up by Saul Greenberg and Bill Buxton in a recent CHI paper on usability evaluation in HCI [20]:

*"In 1968, [Edsger] Dijkstra wrote 'Go To Statement Considered Harmful', a critique of existing programming practices that eventually led the programming community to adopt structured programming. Since then, titles that include the phrase 'considered harmful' signal a critical essay that advocates change."*

This, then, is a critical essay. It is concerned with the changing nature of ethnography in systems design. By systems design, we refer to the development of computing systems and applications. Our purpose is to inform systems designers – i.e., those parties who are actively involved in the development of computing systems and applications, be they human factors experts, requirements engineers, or

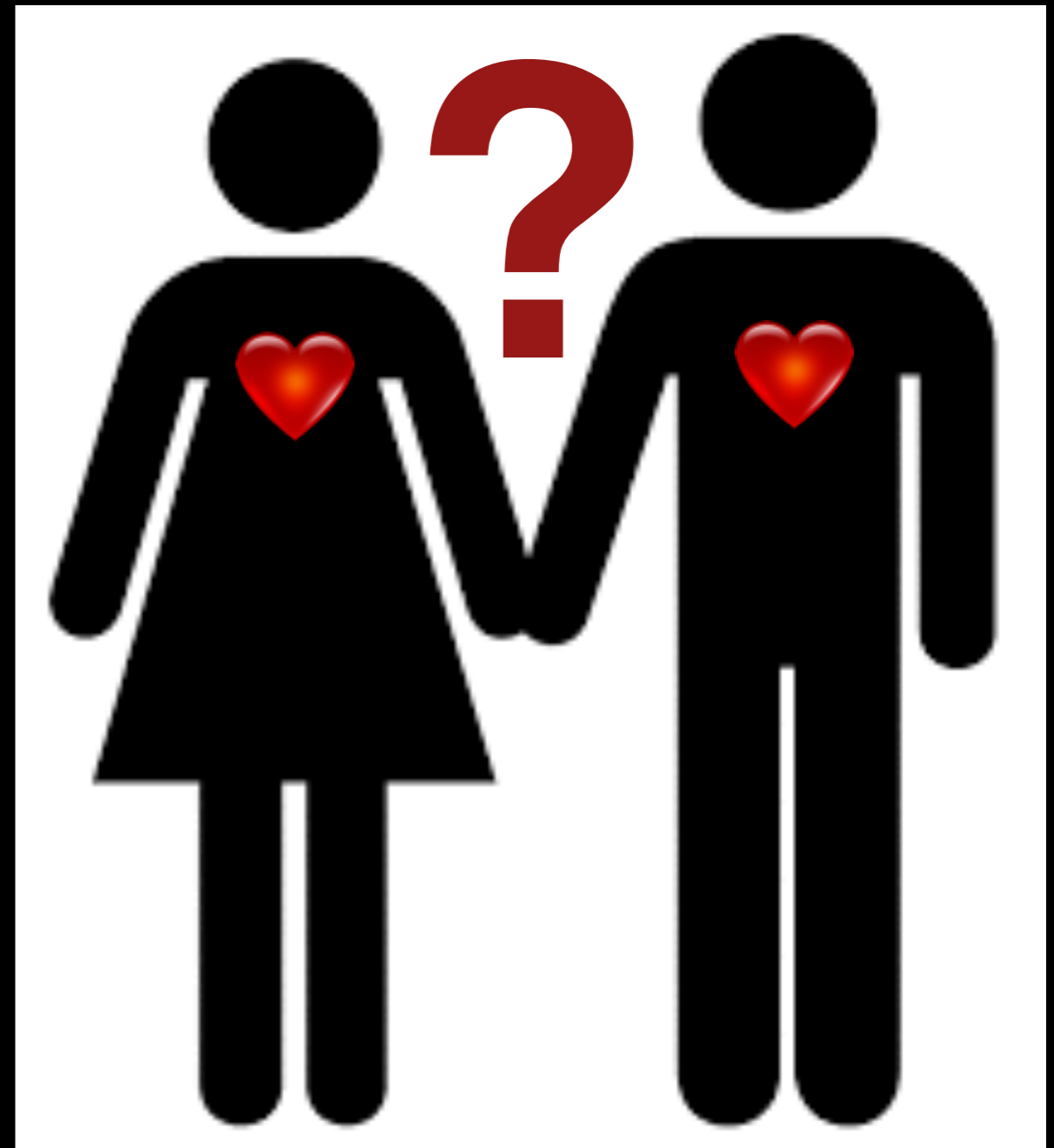
Permission to make digital or hard copies of all or part of this work for personal or classroom use is granted without fee provided that copies are not made or distributed for profit or commercial advantage and that copies bear this notice and the full citation on the first page. To copy otherwise, or to republish, to post on servers or to redistribute to lists, requires prior specific permission and/or a fee.  
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programmers – as to the changing nature of ethnography in systems design and the practical implications this may have for design practice.

Since Suchman's pioneering studies of human-machine communication [33], designers have had an interest in how ethnography can be used to shape the development of technology for the everyday world. To date there has been a particular focus upon the everyday world of work. As the computer moves out of the workplace, this has led HCI researchers to question the use of ethnography to study work-practices and fostered a call for ethnography to return to its anthropological origins and the study of culture. This may appeal to designers who do not have a disciplinary interest in ethnography but who are concerned to build technology upon social science insights. However, this paper intends to make visible and convey the methodological dangers that emerge for systems design in returning ethnography to its cultural origins.

The return to culture results in new approaches to and understandings of ethnography being offered to systems designers. They are new in the sense that they have not been employed in design before. They are, however, already well established in the social sciences. They derive from different, even competing, perspectives on culture and society and reflect a degree of epistemological diversity that it is not possible to address here. We focus instead on different approaches that draw upon them and are emerging within systems design. These have been developed for design purposes by a number of authors. We attend to the more prominent as they provide exemplars of new approaches to ethnography within systems design that many members of the CHI community will recognize.

New approaches to and understandings of ethnography within systems design provide for an entirely different order of ethnographic study to those that have largely been employed in design to date. As Bell et al. [5] put it, the "role differs from the one usually assigned to ethnography in HCI". It is characterized by "ethnographers turning their attention to consumer culture" and "cultural practices" [2] to provide designers with "critical readings of the social context of use" and to "generate innovative suggestions for and approaches to design problems" [4]. New ethnographic approaches draw upon "humanities-based disciplines such as anthropology, literary, cultural and media studies" to provide novel ways of "understanding how we relate to and think about technologies as cultural artefacts" [4].



Ethnomethodology  
and design?

*Research for design*

*versus*

*Research through design*

# Ethnomethodology and design?

*Research for design*

*versus*

*research / art / 'intervention'  
as inspiration to design*

# Ethnomethodology and design?

*Research for design*

Designers, engineers  
as gatekeepers

*research / art / 'intervention'*

*as*

# Constructing situations

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Producing  
disorganisation

Create  
provocative  
events /  
situations



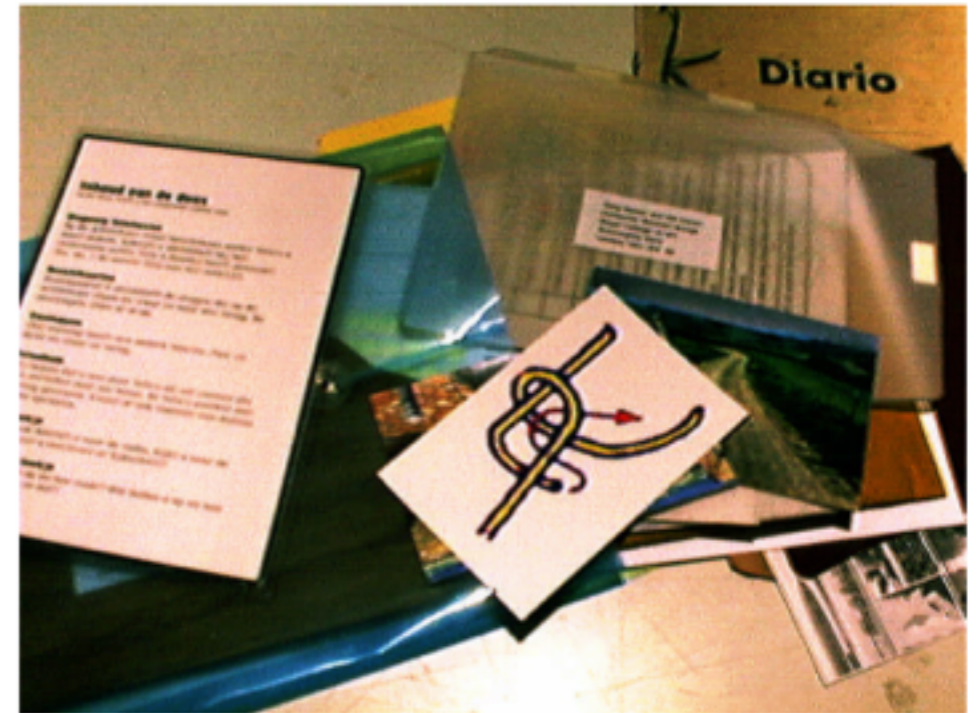
**WE WILL  
NOT LEAD  
WE WILL ONLY  
DETONATE**

**RETOUR  
A LA NORMALE...**

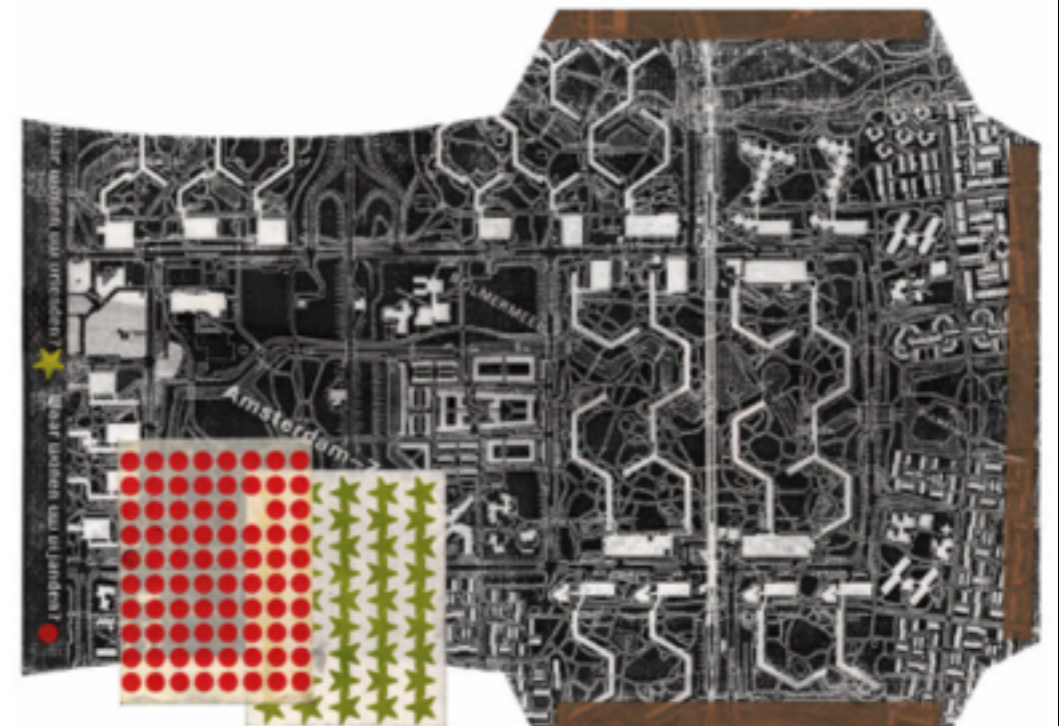


# Create provocative 'probes'

We distributed them in visits to the local sites.



They contained a camera with requests for pictures... ... postcards asking open-ended questions... ...maps for marking the emotional topography of the area ...



# Create provocative 'probes'

...and a photo album asking them to 'tell us your story.'



... (including surreal metaphors) ...



We received hundreds of cards, maps and photos in return.





Create  
provocative  
'probes'

Not 'findings'

Rather, 'returns'...

**for inspiration**

We received hundreds of cards, maps and photos in return.

We did not analyse the  
probe returns

We used texture and  
landmarks to tell stories



# Breaching experiments\*



\*Garfinkel warns these should not properly be called experiments, but more accurately, *demonstrations* meant to produce disorganised interaction.

- Engage in conversation with others with the assumption that what the other person says is directed by hidden motives.
- Bargain for standard priced merchandise in a store.
- Play tic-tac-toe where you ask the other player to make the first move, then erase that mark and move it to another square before making your responding move.
- Stand very, very close to a person while engaging in otherwise innocuous conversation.

# Breaching experiments

## A BREACHING EXPERIMENT



Students were asked to act as boarders in their own home. This is a 'breaching experiment', it disrupts normal routines. It shows how people attempt to construct order and manufacture sense when expected patterns of behaviour are breached.

## A COUNSELLING EXPERIMENT



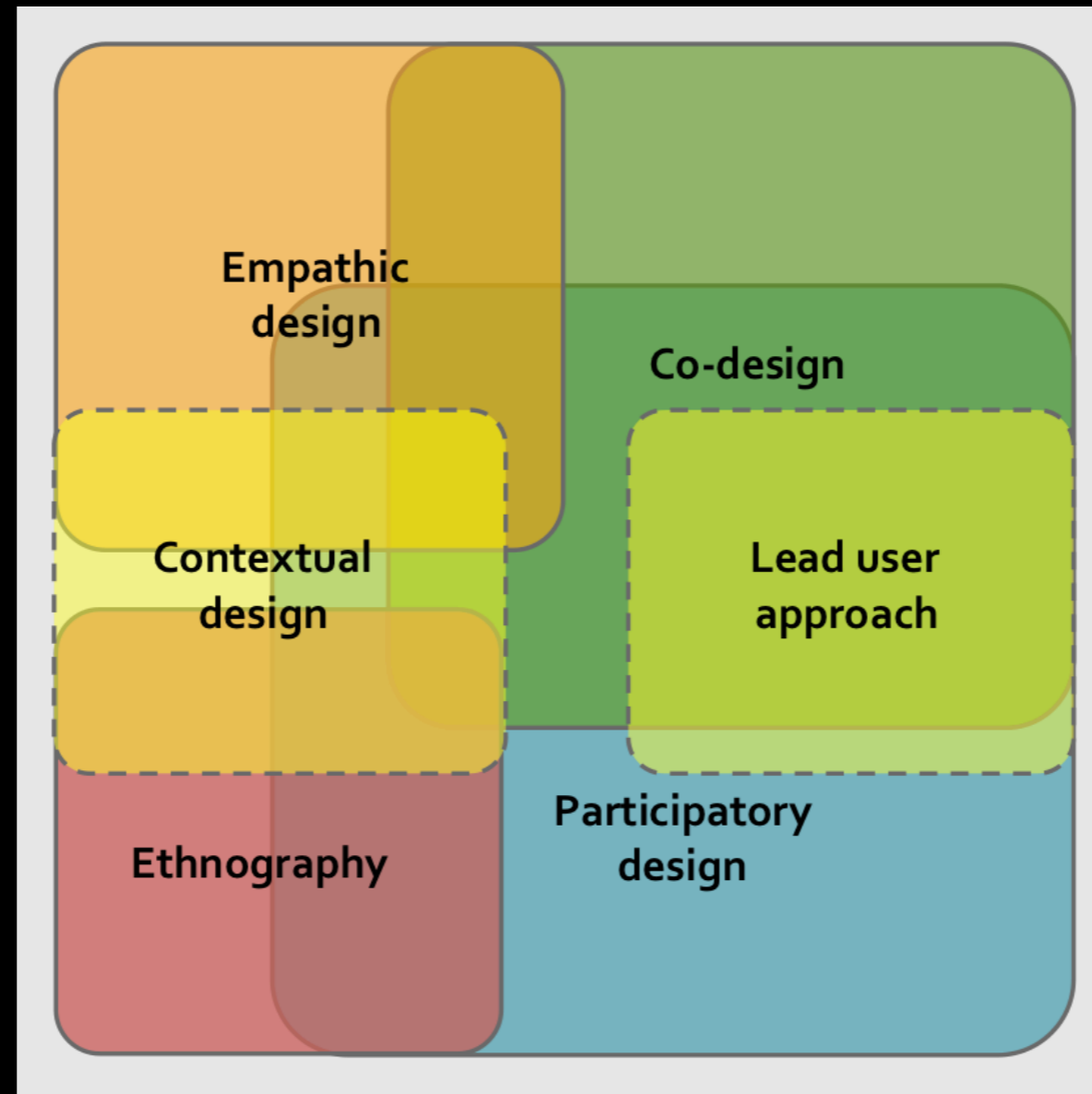
Students asked a counsellor in a university psychiatry department questions about a personal problem. The counsellor – an actor – gave random yes or no answers. The students made sense of the answers where no sense existed.

# Reconfiguring design ethnography

# Ethnography and design

Concern for what could be: a design orientation

Move of  
researchers  
and designers  
toward users



Move of users  
toward  
researchers  
and designers

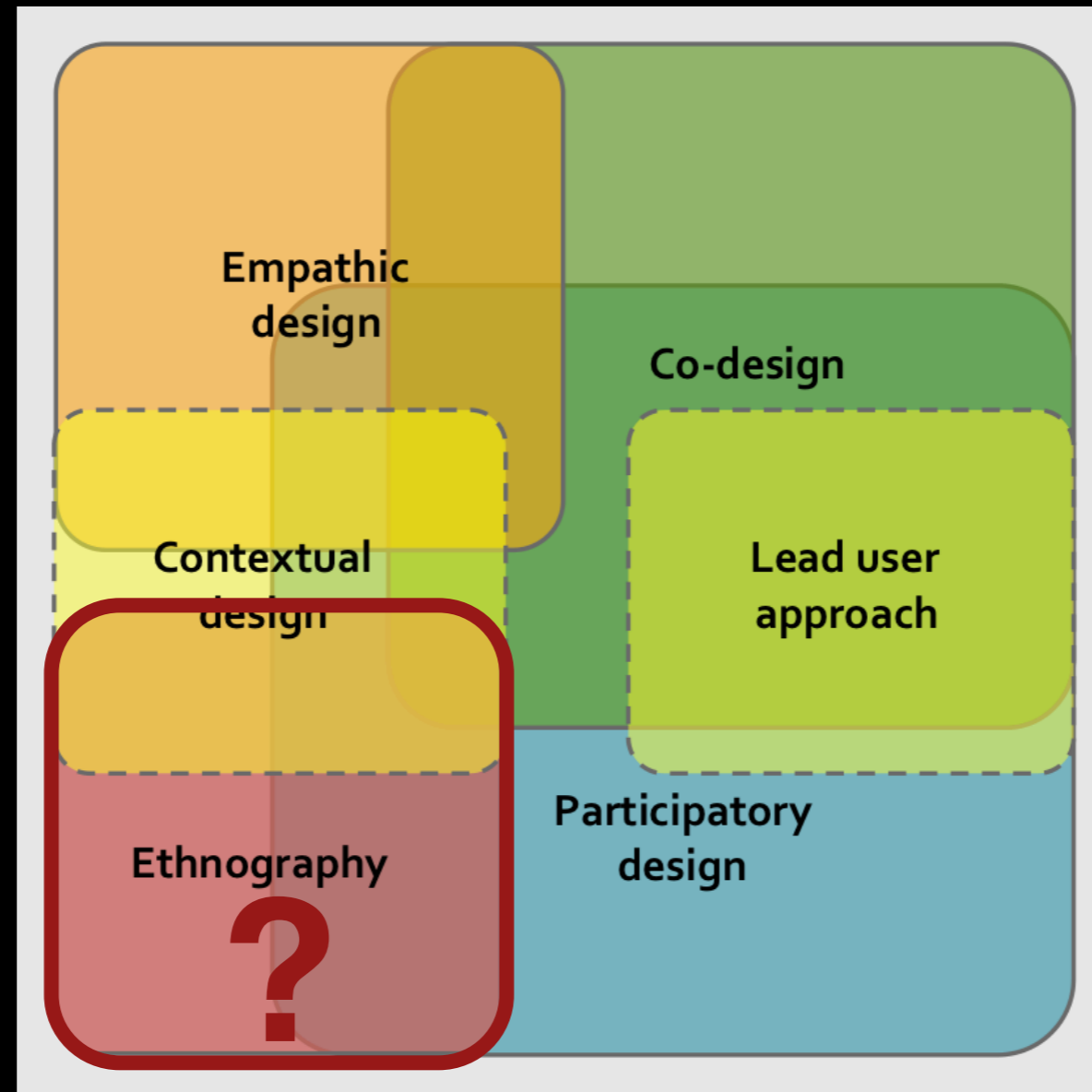
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Concern for what is: a research orientation

# Ethnography and design

Concern for what could be: a design orientation

Move of  
researchers  
and designers  
toward users



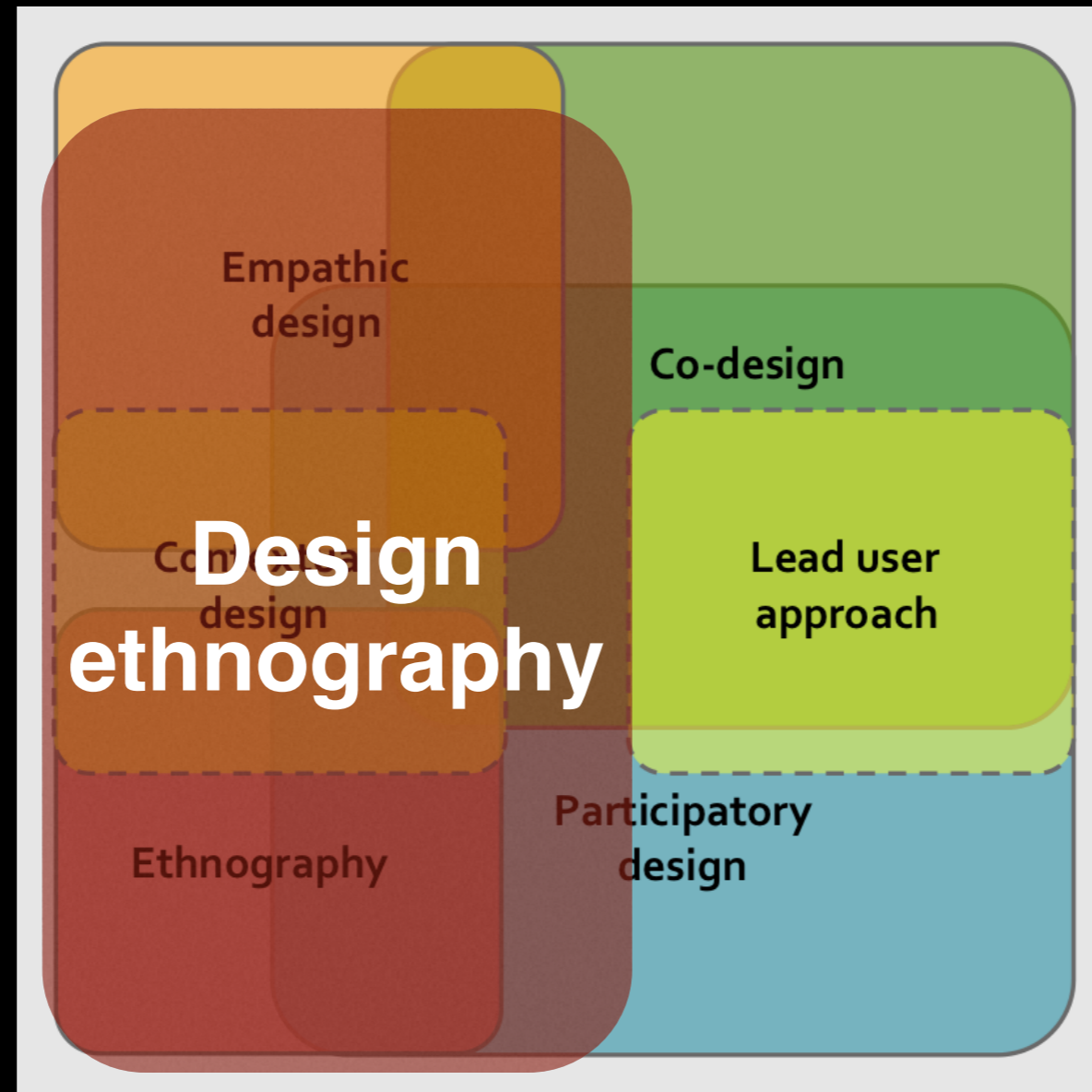
Move of users  
toward  
researchers  
and designers

Concern for what is: a research orientation

# Ethnography and design

Concern for what could be: a design orientation

Move of  
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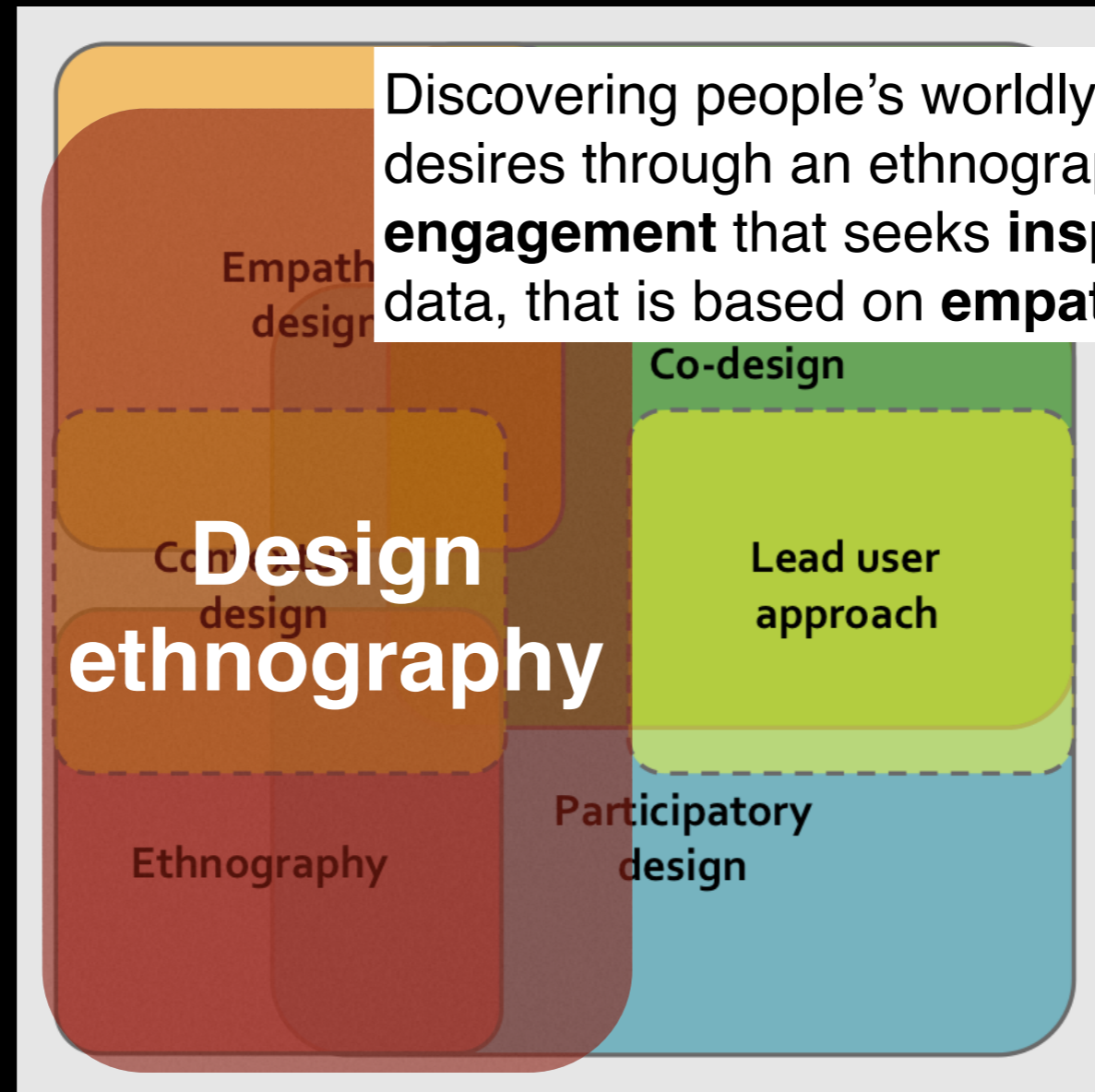
Move of users  
toward  
researchers  
and designers

Concern for what is: a research orientation

# Ethnography and design

Concern for what could be: a design orientation

Move of  
researchers  
and designers  
toward users



Discovering people's worldly ways and heartfelt desires through an ethnography of **communal engagement** that seeks **inspiration**, not simply data, that is based on **empathy**, not detachment.

Move of users  
toward  
researchers  
and designers

Concern for what is: a research orientation





Thank you