

# Back to the Roots

## A Case for a New Ideal for Ethnographic Research for Design

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- Argument for using longer field studies in design through the dissemination of a case study
  - Argument behind performing the case study
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# Ethnography, where did it come from?

- Originated in Anthropology
- 'Urgent anthropology' in 1850's: Morgan and Boas
- First fieldwork done 1898: Torres Strait Island Expedition
- An early definition was "*We decided to use 'ethnography' as the term for descriptive accounts of non-literate peoples*" - Radcliffe-Brown, 1909
- Malinowski revolutionized the field in late 1920's
  - Live with the studied objects to be able to study all aspects of life for an extended period of time
  - Be able to speak the local language
  - Participant observation: Do what the studied objects do as well to the best of your ability, whilst observing them



# Ethnography enters interface design

- Chicago-school started the use of ethnography in Sociology
- Sociology used ethnography at home instead of remote countries as anthropology had done
- Suchman was one of the first to do Design Ethnography
- Hughes et al (1994) concluded that “although there is always more to learn, the payoffs for design, at least in this case, came relatively quickly in comparison with social research uses of ethnography”
- Various approaches to 'quick ethnography' published between mid 90's and a bit into the new millennium.



# Ethnography today in interface design

- The way the term ethnography has been transformed in design is increasingly becoming criticized
- Van Veggel (2005):
  - *[D]esigners approach ethnography for the practical reasons of gaining a rich and deep understanding of users that can be easily integrated into design projects. [p. 5]*
  - *[A]nthropologists approach, ethnography as the methodological component of a theoretical endeavor to understand humans as socio-cultural beings, who presumably act and think in a different way: ethnography is a method to understand other people – anthropology is that understanding. [p. 8]*



## The case

- A re-design project of the graphical user interface (GUI) of an internal cell phone network simulation tool
- Many new functions have been added but no major GUI work has been done since 1998
- One major issue identified by the development team was the huge increase in the elements of the cell phone network



# Methodology

- Influenced by the anthropological approach to ethnography as described by Agar (1996) and by the critique of ethnography for design put forward by van Veggel (2005):
  - Designers are often not properly prepared for fieldwork
  - Designers do not analyze the data as thoroughly as they should
- Long preparations in collaboration with the software developers
- 18 days of field work
  - Different stages in the field work with different techniques used
  - Continuous preliminary analysis
- Final analysis after field work was completed aimed at creating a design rationale



## Results of the study

- The development team's work on the current GUI had been oriented towards user groups based on work tasks
  - New suggestion: Divide the users according to the role the system has in the user's daily work routine: as a primary tool, as a secondary tool or as a background tool
- Divided in this way it is evident that knowledge and functional proficiency vary extremely between the groups
  - The design has to support the work flow of those who work in the system eight hours a day as well as of those who use the software maybe once a month.
- System needs to support an interrupted work flow.





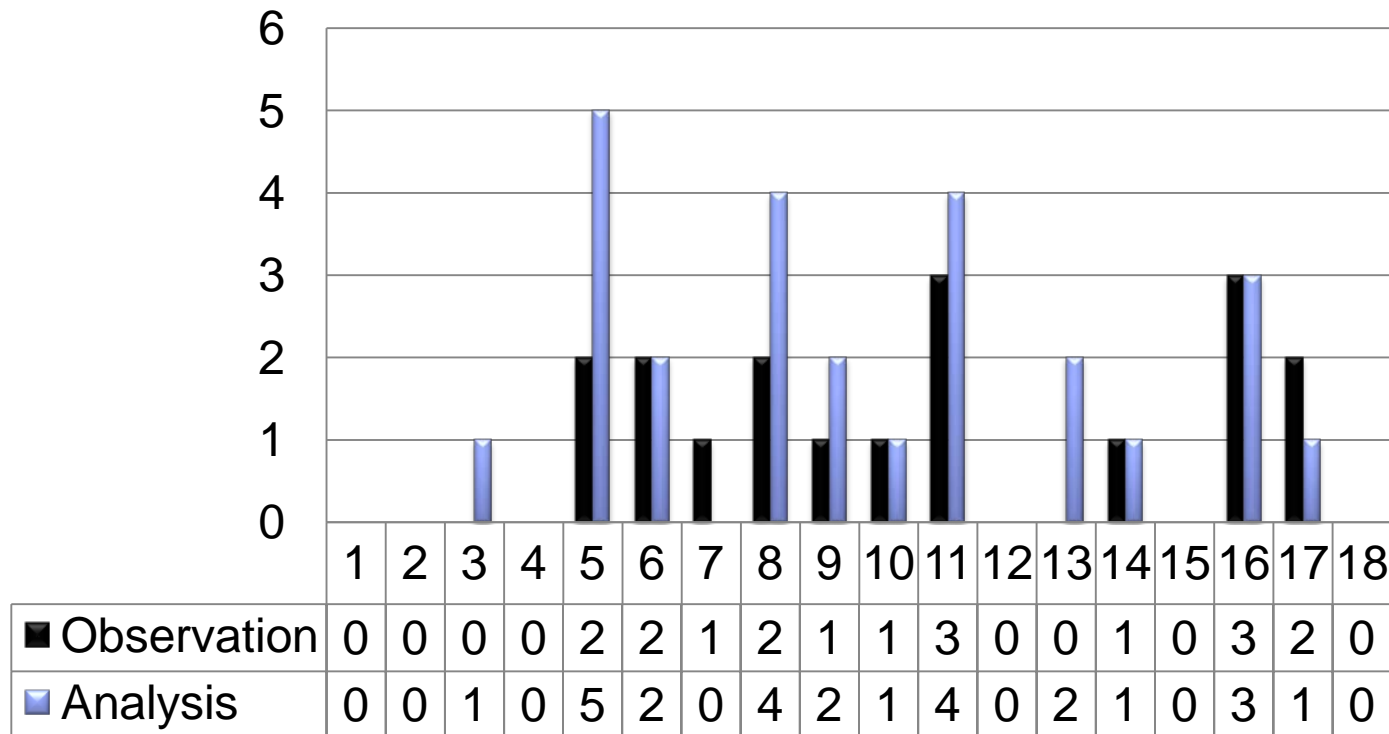
## Meta-Results (1)

- The design rationale was analyzed in comparison to the field notes
- Findings were mapped according to during which day they were first mentioned in the field notes
- Days afterwards sorted according to calendar days
  - Week 1 + 4: 4 days
  - Week 2 + 3: 5 days



## Meta-Results (2)

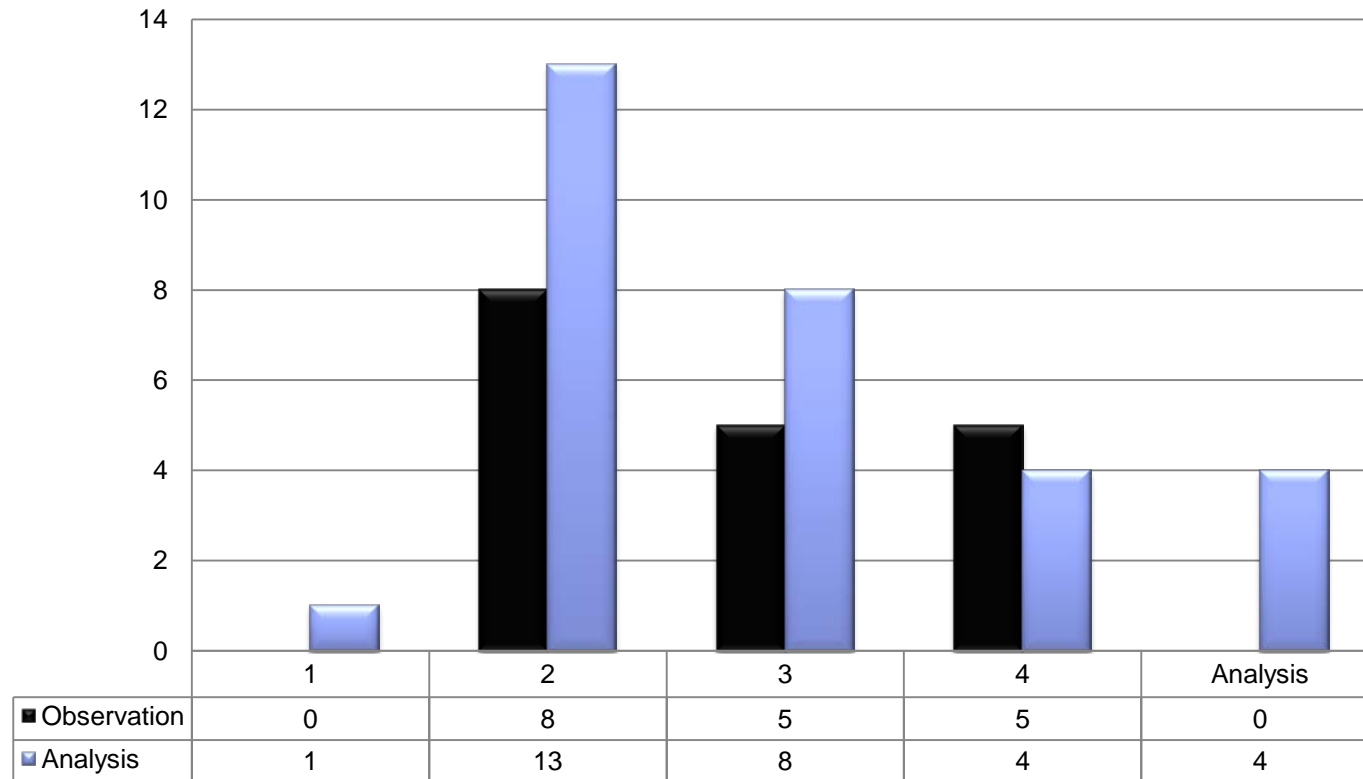
### Insights plotted on a daily basis





# Meta-Results (3)

Insights plotted on a weekly basis





## Summing up

- Prepare properly
- Analysis plays a crucial part in fieldwork and start early
- Allow the field work to take time



HUMAN-CENTERED SYSTEMS  
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