When design games and ethnography meet

Can design games be seen as a new mode of ethnographic inquiry into people’s concerns, aspirations, and imaginative horizons?

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Existing practices

Open-ended design agendas

Event-driven process

Design laboratories

(Event-driven Product development: Collaboration and Learning, Brandt (2001))

(Rehearsing the Future, Halse et al. (2010))
Participatory design games

Combining co-analysis of existing practices with exploring possible futures

Ethnographic field work -> Design game materials

A tentative definition of participatory design games

• ... a collaborative activity guided by simple and explicit rules, assigned roles and ...

• The game materials typically point to either or both existing practices and future possibilities.
A tentative definition (2)  
(brandt, messeter, and binder (2008))

• The game is played within a ... shared temporal and spatial setting....

• The purpose ... is to establish and explore novel configurations of the game materials and the present and future practices to which these materials point.

How to inspire others to work with participatory design games?

One size fits all

The games are always designed for a specific project/purpose

Research colleagues/designers
(e.g. at conferences)

Teaching students
 designers, engineering designers, ethnographers ..)
The Re-framing Waste Game (by Halse and Rasmussen, 2012)

= An introduction to design games

Based on the DAIM research project
(Halse et al. 2010)

Ethnographic material:
Video accounts
Portraits of people
Quotes from interviews
Images

3 in 1 game...

THE PROBLEM

VF, a waste handling company, wishes, through fieldwork and design proposals, illuminated how to promote a better sorting in apartment buildings.

Video presentation of person gallery

... make notes about what you find important
... pick one person whom you will empathize with through out the game

Tobias, 10 year old resident
Leon, the caretaker
Jan, resident with three children
(married to Mariene)
Mariene ...

Søren, local social worker
Turkan, resident of Turkish origin, with four children
Carsten, waste collector
LANDSCAPE GAME  Create a fictive situation where your person appears

Write a note about the situation

Place the situation in the landscape

Person + snapshot + quote

Discuss the situations ... relations ...

WHAT IF ...  see situations in a new light and imagine that they could be different

Take turns in placing ‘what if’ and ‘historical fact’ cards on a good place in the landscape,

... providing a new frame for a specific situation.

What If... card  Historical fact card
**PRIORITY CIRCLE**

Move the re-framed situations one by one from the Landscape game board to the Priority Circle, and discuss their importance.

The most important situation should be placed in the inner circle.

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**FUTURE STORIES**

... tell a future story about how the specific situation in the center of the priority circle could unfold in alternative ways.

The future story should have a beginning (the first scene), a middle, and an end.

Start by selecting 3 back drop images from the field work.

Video-record the final version of the story (1-2 minutes in all).
Can the particular staging of design games be seen as a new mode of ethnographic inquiry into people’s concerns, aspirations, and imaginative horizons?

Re-framing waste made the players reflect on the field work ...

Having to be a specific person created and emphatic engagement ...

... familiarization with the persons particular way of handling waste, beliefs, environment ...

Players had to interpret the ethnographic material in order to choose, relate and combine ... (create situations)
‘What if …’ questions

... a typical designerly take when heading towards imaginative horizons ...

But it has also resemblances to how the ethnographer continuously work with the dynamics between familiarization and estrangement ...

‘Historical facts’ ..... 

Worked well as a catalyst for analyzing the present in the light of the past.

Facts about the past, also evoked new ideas for improving the local present practices.
The ‘Priority circle’

Forces the players to verbalize thoughts and concerns.

It becomes evident that the players have different understandings and aspirations, and that dialogue and negotiation is the way forward.

There seems to be similarities to method-considerations in relation to conducting ethnographic interviews.

Enacting possible futures

In the Re-framing Waste Game the players play someone else (pros / cons ...)

One may question how convincing the scenarios are – but never the less – the framing that the ‘doll-scenario’ provides fuel dialogue and evoke joint imagination.

A new mode of ethnographic inquiry / challenges assumptions
Can a particular staging of a collaborative design game be seen as a new mode of ethnographic inquiry into people’s concerns, aspirations, and imaginative horizons?

The answer depends on the design of the particular design game.

YES – if …

… Part of the game materials have their root in ethnographic field work

… The rules-of-the-game supports co-analysis / (joint) inquiry into people’s concerns, aspirations …

… The players have something at stake (… engagement/ownership)

Re-framing Waste – a design game
Joachim Halse and Matylda Rasmussen (2012). The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, Schools of Architecture, design and conservation, School of Design.

Participation through Exploratory Design Games

Rehearsing the Future.

The Design:Lab as platform in participatory design research.

Formatting Design Dialogues – Games and Participation