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Book Review Form

TITLE: Designing Collaborative Systems: A practical guide to ethnography
AUTHORS/EDITORS: Andy Crabtree
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Note: When writing the review, the following hints and tips may be useful:

- Give an idea of what the book covers, but without simply listing the contents.
- Express your opinion about the book's contents regarding its originality, clarity of presentation, organisation etc. Mention what you approve and disapprove of.
- Include consideration of the usefulness of the book to the intended audience.
- You are encouraged to put the book in a comparative context, citing other work which is closely related.
- Try to avoid expressing personal views and experiences on the topic, except possibly to highlight serious omissions or particular strengths of the book.

The review should not be longer than 500 words. Thank you.

The relationship between ethnography and design, in particular the transitions from the ubiquitous 'implications for design' at the end of many ethnographic reports to particular design solutions, has remained largely problematic or, when it is achieved, largely invisible. The major contribution of this book about "Designing Collaborative Systems" is that it moves the discussion beyond questions of whether ethnography has something to contribute to design to show practically and visibly how this can be achieved throughout the design lifecycle.

The book is simply structured into four broad logical moves from requirements problems, to ethnography as an approach to understanding, to engagement with design issues, to situated evaluation for design. The credibility of these discussions is enhanced by the author's own long-standing engagement with ethnography and the design of collaborative systems, reflected in the case of the library help desk/interface design that provides a common point of reference across chapters 2-4.

The text is imminently readable. Crabtree is able to synthesise and reflect upon material from a number of areas (as evidenced by the long reference list at the end, albeit from largely European authors) with great clarity of argument. This makes such complex and diverse subject matter approachable for all types of audiences from the social sciences to computer science, from research to academia. One minor exception is noted below.

The requirements problem discussions in Chapter 1 provide a most coherent and convincing argument about the problems associated with both traditional requirements gathering techniques and more cognitively-focussed HCI approaches for socially-situated software. This should be compulsory reading for all students of HCI/CSCW/software requirements. Chapter 2 is the most difficult to read; "Garfinkel's complicated locution" (p. 83) seems to be mirrored in the discussion itself, making it heavy going. Nonetheless it provides a useful synthesis of even more complex sociological literature. It is here that Crabtree makes his arguments for ethnomethodological ethnography, critiquing, as ethnomethodologists are known to do, the normative accounts of more constructive analytical techniques applied to ethnographic data.

While the book is sub-titled "a practical guide to ethnography", it is practical in the sense of being illustrative rather than instructive, "sensitizing the reader to a discrete ensemble of practical strategies and methods" (p. 165). The methods introduced in Chapters 3 and 4 do indeed represent one of the first attempts to draw together such approaches in one discussion. However, it isn't always clear if and how these methods work together. The library case, for example, is used to illustrate both the patterns and use scenario techniques but we are not given any insight into how both of these techniques worked together in the design process for this particular case. This and the other cases

also represent small scale endeavours, leaving the reader with significant questions about how these methods might scale to larger commercial engagements. As such, the book is likely to be more immediately appropriate to a research audience than an industry practitioner looking for an instructional toolkit. This is not a serious weakness.

In its own right, this book makes a significant contribution, reflecting the work of ethnography itself, in accounting for the practical work of understanding and design in a coherent and accessible manner. This book could be read equally by ethnographers as a book about applied ethnomethodologically-informed ethnography, and by designers/developers as a book about how to apply an understanding of the “real world, real time character of work” (p. 46) throughout the design lifecycle for all types of user-oriented systems, not just collaborative systems.

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FIRST NAME: Geraldine

SURNAME: Fitzpatrick

EMPLOYER: University of Sussex

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COUNTRY: UK