The Qualitheque - communicating quality-in-use of information technology

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Abstract

Imagine an Internet application where you can experience how different forms of Information Technology (IT) have been used in different real contexts. Imagine that the cases include details on the design of the IT systems and their effects on use situations, using video, sound and hands-on prototypes as well as text. Imagine that there are lively electronic discussions of the cases where members of the world-wide IT design community give comments on central issues, question conclusions and point out similarities to cases from their own experience. That application is what I call the Qualitheque.

The Qualitheque

The main goal of the project is to contribute to a contextual "theory of style" in the design of information technology (IT). What we founded on facts enables us to estimate the quality of the IT - not only as functional aspects, but also as form or aestetical aspects. This "theory of style" builds on a repertoire of exemplars for reflections on design quality when the systems are in use. During the first year of the IT Design Quality Project we have done four explorative studies; the contextual use of sales support systems at IKEA and Volvo; a CAD system in a building projection; and a "locally developed" user interface and systems in a repair shop. In my thesis I shall be elaborating on the case study carried out at the furniture store IKEA. When I later in this abstract refer to "us" I shall be referring to Erika and me, who did the case study at IKEA.

I am specifically going to reflect upon the result of the design of a sale support system at IKEA. One of the questions being asked during the IKEA case is how a computer based information system at IKEA named MHS (acronym for Möbel Hus Systemet, in English Furniture House System) is used in its context. To find out something about the use of the MHS, I have chosen to do some participative observations at different departments of an IKEA store, and studied the employees way of handling the daily work with the support of the MHS. The members of the project have taken part in work in some specific real working situations. This active participatory part has been conducted by two members of the project working in different departments at the IKEA store in Malmö. We followed the goods through the store house, starting our study by working some days at the loading ramp and store. In total, we spent four weeks working in most of the departments, ending up at the goods delivery office. By asking the co-workers questions during the work we had the opportunity to form an idea of work with the system in its real context (e.g. the context of a new employee).

After the observation and working phase the project members interviewed staff at different departments at Malmö and Copenhagen. Some interviews were made with IKEAs system developers in Helsingborg, and with staff at the mail

order department at Älmhult. During the interviews we focused on the development and practical use of the MHS, and what kind of experiences and expectations users and designers had in relation to the system.

1. What is it like to work on the MHS?
2. What is the advantage and disadvantage of using the MHS?

In parallel the project has conducted studies of the MHS documentation. The documentation studies have helped us form an idea about how the IT artefact(s) are structurally built with what components, and with what formal information. This is a context affected by the users' and designers' experiences of different versions of MHS, and the experiences are affected by their expectations and vice versa. The more experienced the staff, the easier they were able to see patterns in ways the systems might be used more complicated.

We asked the respondents whether it would be possible and desirable to make systems that were easier to use, but without making the working tasks more monotonous (i.e. we wanted them to be visionaries).

My contextual approach:
- focuses on the form and function of artefacts-in-use
- has consequences for my mode of presentation.

The narratives in my thesis, and in our case reports were not invented for fun, but of need for a language that reflects the artefacts-in-use and express contextual ethical and aesthetical considerations.