NEW GROUNDS, NEW CHALLENGES? EXPLORING STAKEHOLDER RESEARCH IN SERVICE DESIGN

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ABSTRACT

This is a submission for the doctoral consortium at NorDes 2011. The research described herein focuses on how existing design tools and techniques need to be appropriated when used in a new context – in this case service design. It is argued that the nature of services poses new challenges for designers. A theoretical introduction to these challenges is given, presenting a view of service design as the intersection between the user-centred design tradition and thoughts on service from marketing and management.

The specific challenges in conducting stakeholder research for service design are introduced. The research objectives of the PhD candidate are given. The findings which were used for the licentiate thesis of the author are presented; they focus on visualisations for service design. The licentiate thesis confirms the view that visualisations are a crucial part of service design practice, but also shows that many visualisations primarily highlight those features of service which have been the traditional focus of design and lack in representing other service traits. Finally, the planned direction of the continued research is highlighted.

INTRODUCTION

Service design is a still emerging design field in which most English language research has been published in 2008 or later (Blomkvist, Holmlid, & Segelström, 2010). Earlier research had to a large extent been published in Italian (see Pacenti & Sangiorgi, 2010).

However, service design stands on the shoulders on many other disciplines (see Stickdorn & Schneider (2010) for examples). From a design perspective, the industrial design and interaction design are the biggest influentiors (Segelström, 2010; Holmlid, 2007). From a service perspective, service marketing and service management have made the greatest impact on service design (Segelström, 2010).

The tools and techniques of service design are to a large extent inherited from industrial and interaction design and the focus on human-centred design (Holmlid & Evenson, 2008). However, the move from working with products to services could change the way the tools could and/or should be used. This becomes clear when the definition of service design used in this PhD project is presented:

Service design can be described as the use of a designerly way of searching for solutions to problems in people-intensive service systems through the engagement of stakeholders. (Segelström, 2010, p. 16)

The aim of the PhD project presented herein is to explore how service designers approach the 'engagement of stakeholders'. Questions raised include:

- How are the tools inherited from other disciplines used in this new context? (How) are they appropriated?

- Are new tools developed?

- How are stakeholder insights maintained throughout the design process?

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

As stated in the introduction service design is a emerging field drawing on knowledge from both service and design research, the two fields and their impact on service design is introduced briefly below. As service design is more of a design field than a service field (Segelström, 2010) design is presented first below.

(USER-CENTRED) DESIGN

If one looks in the few service design textbooks which exist today (see Stickdorn & Schneider, 2010; Miettinen & Koivisto, 2009; Mager & Gais, 2009) most tools presented are inherited from user-centred design. Techniques such as contextual user research, prototyping and sketches as a way of exploring (referred to as *visualisations* within the service design community) are presented as the way of working for service designers.

However, if further scrutinized it becomes apparent that what is said about these tools and techniques is either inherited knowledge from industrial and/or interaction design or based on anecdotical evidence. This means that there is a need to investigate the tools and techniques used from an academic perspective to build a foundation for future research and to communicate to the ever-growing group of people interested in learning more about service design.

SERVICE

The nature of services poses new challenges for the service design community, in comparison to traditional design disciplines. Whereas design traditionally deals with tangible artefacts, most services are a flow of events mediated through artefacts and interactions.

Research into service started properly in the 1970's, and early research focused on clarifying why services were different from products. In a literature review, Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Leonard (1985) identified four characteristics in services commonly stated:

- *Intangibility:* The intangibility of services refers to that services cannot be touched.

- *Heterogeneity:* The outcome of a service procedure cannot be standardized in the same way as goods production can be, as different personnel with different personalities and moods will deliver the service.

- *Inseparability:* The production of services is inseparable from the consumption thereof.

- *Perishability:* A service cannot be pre-produced and saved for later use.

The view of services as not-products has however evolved to seeing services as the foundation of all economic transactions. This view holds that you do not buy a product for the product itself but rather for the outcome of using it. A series of publications by Vargo & Lusch (2004; 2008) have been the most influential in this change in the perception of what a service is.

Interestingly, these changes in perception of what services are have highlighted the role of design in service development. A number of service design scholars have explored how the theories of Vargo & Lusch fit together with design practice (see Kimbell, 2010; Wetter Edman, 2010; Wetter Edman, 2009; Cautela, Rizzo, & Zurlo, 2009).

SERVICE DESIGN RESEARCH

The history of service design research has strong similarities to that of early service research – as a recent overview of service design research highlighted; early service design research to a large extent was about arguing for service design's right to exist (Blomkvist, Holmlid, & Segelström, 2010). It also highlighted to main approaches to service design research; expanding the reach and integrating new knowledge and to challenge the inherited knowledge from other user-centered design fields. Examples of integrating knowledge is making the connections between service theory and service design highlighted in the 'Service'-section. Examples of challenging inherited knowledge is the research presented below and the work on prototyping for service design by Blomkvist & Holmlid, (2010).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The research in this PhD projects focuses on how knowledge about the users is gathered in the early design stages and maintained throughout the design process. Designers are used to working with users, and observing them contextually and to represent that knowledge in abstract ways such as personas.

However, in service delivery there are (usually) humans performing actions on both sides of the service as the service is delivered. With this in mind, it maybe isn't a surprise that many service designers prefer to talk about stakeholders rather than users.

When both service deliverer and service recipient is a stakeholder in that end-design works do our old tools and techniques still work? Do they need to be appropriated?

At the outset of this PhD project no research existed which focused on how tools and techniques might need to be changed. The PhD project thus takes a basic approach, aiming at creating an academic base for future research. Current practice is described, and analysed critically to highlight problematic areas.

The intended target audience of the basic descriptions is primarily those wanting to learn more about service design (students, clients, designers from other fields) whereas the critical analysis is aimed at the service design community, both researchers and reflecting practitioners.

APPROACH

The approach taken to PhD research is to have an outcome that is descriptive rather than prescriptive. That is, the current use of tools and techniques is studied and analysed. The publications from the PhD project aim at describing practice, and potential problems rather than finding a specific issue and trying to find a prescriptive solution to this issue.

The methodological approach relies on the anthropological take on ethnography (in comparison to the sociological which is more common within design). A mixture of interview studies, participatory observation studies and analysis of the results of stakeholder research is used to inform the topic from a variety of perspectives.

INTERMEDIATE RESULTS

The PhD project started with a large number of interviews with practicing service designers, performed in late 2008. These interviews focused on the stakeholder-insight gathering and abstractions thereof.

As the interviews were performed it became clear that many of the interviewees had troubles expressing themselves in regard to the tools and methods they used for gathering stakeholder-insights. On the other hand, they were comfortable in speaking about the various techniques used to abstract the insights in to items easier to refer to – so called visualisations.

The initial analysis of the interviews does focused on how service designers talk on their use of visualisations. The results were published as two conference articles at design conferences in 2009: Segelström & Holmlid (2009) and Segelström (2009). Segelström & Holmlid (2009) focused on how visualisations are used to support the stakeholder research. Segelström (2009) explored how visualisations were used as a strategic tool to communicate the results of stakeholder research to various stakeholders in the design process and identified a set of basic visualisation techniques used by most service designers. These results also were the foundation for a publication at a service conference highlighting the use of visualisations in service design (Segelström, Blomkvist & Holmlid, 2010).

During the period of publication of the articles referenced above, a number of new publications appeared which are of interested for the continued research. Kimbell (2009) highlighted the use of visualisations as something unique for service design and Diana, Pacenti &Tassi (2009) created a framework for mapping the difference in content between various visualisation techniques. There were also publications exploring specific techniques; the blueprinting technique inherited from service management was the focus of both Wreiner et al (2009), and Aebersold, Polaine & Schäfer (2010).

Based on the insights from the interview study and the new framework by Diana, Pacenti &Tassi (2009), and the two ideas of what services are presented above (not-goods vs. basis for all transactions) existing visualisations created by service design consultancies in actual projects were analysed. The focus of analysis was if the visualisations communicated the aspects suggested by the four frameworks. It was found that the visualisations focused on the qualities traditionally highlighted within user-centred design rather than features of services. It was also found that the not-goods view of service was more apparent than as the basis for economic transaction. These results were published as part of my licentiate thesis during autumn 2010 (Segelström, 2010) but are yet to be submitted to conferences/journals.

As for gathering user insights, this will be the focus of the continued research. However a publication giving examples of how ethnographic tools can be appropriated for gathering stakeholder insights when new service are to be developed has been published together with a representative for a company focusing on stakeholder research for design (Segelström, Raijmakers & Holmlid, 2009). Additionally a workshop teaching ethnographic approaches for service design was given together with the same company at a service design conference (van Dijk, Segelström, Raijmakers & Holmlid, 2008).

CONTINUED RESEARCH

The aim of the continued research is to analyse the remaining parts of the interviews to get a basic description of how service design practitioners claim to do stakeholder research, and do follow up interviews to see how practice has evolved over the two years since the interviews were done. This is planned for spring 2011.

After this initial understanding has been created, the aim is to embed myself in service design consultancies for 1-2 months and observe how their stakeholder research and creation of visualisations is performed in practice. The aim is to do this together with three companies with different profiles and locations. At the time of writing the first such field work is being planned together with a consultancy for late spring 2011. Hopefully all can be finished by the end of 2011.

Such research would give a holistic view of how the different stages in stakeholder research is performed rather than a segmented view as when one focuses on specific parts of the process.

A paper is also planned together with Blomkvist, focusing on the move from research techniques and prototyping and how many of the visualisation techniques can be used equally well for describing what is as envisioning what could be. Important earlier research on how techniques are used in this borderland has been done by researchers at Aalto university (Vaajakallio, 2009; Kaario et al, 2009; Viña & Mattelmäki, 2010) and by Sleeswijk Visser (2009).

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