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Research project U1 / B6
Software Engineering as Ensemble of Cultural-Social Practices

Abstract

Ethnographic analysis of the working cultures and the lived work of software engineering is at the centre of my research project. By participant observation in this context I am trying to describe the happenings in several small Berlin based agencies for software engineering and web-design as forming a fabric of situated practical performances. In addition to tacit knowledge, ethno-methods and ethno-theories of the actors, special attention is paid to the practical couplings of high tech artefacts (computers screens, touch pads, keyboards, IDEs, programming tools, programming languages etc.), the programmer's body and the actual locality and equipment (office rooms, filing cabinets, chairs, desks, folders, paper, pencils etc.)

Focussing the material and bodily anchoring of programming and other practices it is becoming evident that and how these practices are connected to the material-symbolic and cultural arrangement called "office". Referring to this, software engineering can be described as a post-traditional cultural performance of office-work in which the boundaries between work and leisure, the subject and the firm are blurred.

Beyond that my ethnographic approach accentuates the observable, outer, gestural dimension of programming. I try to trace the modes in which certain styles of programming are formed through interactions with the programming environment, bodily movements and the intelligence of the knowing hands which guide the fingers on their way across the keyboard. These styles are also to be found in the results of this practices, i.e. the code, aesthetically judged to be smart, elegant or compact.

There are two wider research goals tied up with this ethnographic fieldwork: first is the attempt to reconstruct the bodily-mental processes of habitus formation in the field of software engineering by ethnographic and micro-sociological means. Secondly I try to address some basic theoretical questions posed in the discussions following the so called practical turn in social theory, concerning thinking, movements of the body, knowledge and their interrelatedness and processuality.