

Letter of Address at the IRIS 34 in Turku Finland (August 18, 2011)

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Dear friends,

Last week I received a phone call from Reima. He asked me to talk about 10 minutes during the conference dinner about the history of IRIS. After this I could play a couple pieces with my clarinet.. I was stupid enough to accept, even if I soon became aware of the mission being impossible for two reasons: 1) The material is huge and it is too much to be reasonably reviewed within 10 minutes, and 2) the capacity of my own memory is restricted and has not become better during the years. The next challenge was to find some connection between these two genres of performance. This made me to restructure the task. I shall start it with my clarinet:

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This is a tango with the title "Kesän muistatko sen?" - "Do you remember that summer?" "Den sommarn minns du än?" It was composed in 1967 by myself, and the special feature of it is that I used a computer model . This offered an opportunity to receive publicity. For example, IBM Finland decided to distribute the recording as Christmas present to its employees. But it also relates the work in the tradition of Artificial intelligence, with a spelled out intention to replace human work by computer applications. This is something that probably and hopefully many of researchers in the IRIS tradition will not share.

The second tune has an explicit reference to this conference site:

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This is a waltz of shanty style, and it is composed by Pentti Viherluoto (Turku). The title is "Aamu Airistolla" - "Morning on Airisto". Airisto is the first area of open sea when one sails outwards from Turku, which makes it to a living room for all boat people in Turku. And you can see Airisto right over there. You even had the opportunity to sail on it yesterday. During 1970's, just before the first IRIS seminar, I was one of the sailors, and I even have broken down the mast of my yacht on Airisto into two pieces.

What then connects these two small pieces of music? They are clearly representing two different views of human beings. The tango illustrates a rather mechanistic notion of human being whereas the life on a sailing vessel necessarily is much more based on action in rapidly changing situations. Once I had sailed out before I learned that one crew member could not swim. Of course, we had to reformulate and retrain most of our processes. The difference between the two tunes also describes the development in my personal history from main stream hard core computer science towards the soft wing of information systems. This reorientation was not stimulated by sailing alone, I also spent much time by reading Moomin books and by listening Beatles music.

For those of you who are familiar with the life and works of Ludwig Wittgenstein can easily see the parallel between the dramatic change in his work from Tractatus (1922) to Philosophische Untersuchungen (1936 - 1946) and my

personal development. The new orientation has since then given fruitful guidelines to my future work. It also prepared me to the emergence of IRIS. Perhaps I had an implicit desire for the Scandinavian approach, whatever it is.

The series of IRIS meetings can be structured in periods of four years (in analogy to the Olympic games). During the period each of the Nordic countries (exclusive Iceland) organises the conference. The only exception was during the first 4-year period, when all the seminars were organised in Finland (Tampere, Turku, Jyväskylä, Oulu). The initiative was presented by professors Pertti Järvinen (Tampere) and Pentti Kerola (Oulu). Participants came from major Finnish universities, but from the very first seminar the event was called "Scandinavian", and a few guests from Nordic countries were invited to participate. The enthusiasm was to a great extent created by the works and summer courses given by professor Börje Langefors, and most of the Scandinavian guests were more or less disciples to him, Mats Lundeborg, Göran Goldkuhl, Rolf Høyer and John Kjær, just to name a few of them. The meetings were rather small, starting with the size of 10-30. But the character of informal working seminar was quite clear from the very beginning: participants were expected to submit papers, and these were discussed thoroughly. Each participant was supposed to deliver written comments on each paper. These comments and subsequent discussion/debate was published in the proceedings. The proportion of senior/junior participant was also problematic from the beginning. On the other hand, the young discipline had not yet so large supply of true seniors. Different sport activities (e.g. jogging) were part of the seminar, even if they took the form of IRIS Games as late as 1995 at the IRIS18.

I imagine that it was quite convenient for the Scandinavian guests to arrive to the first seminars organised in Finland. Even if we tried to give them a hint that some of them could take their turn to organise the next meeting, they obviously seemed to prefer to continue coming to the meetings in Finland. Now I tell you how the circulation was started. We Finns used a strategy that might be called the Trojan Horse approach.

After the seminar No 4 1981 in Oulu the question of the site for the subsequent year was raised again. Everybody was eagerly supporting the continuation of the tradition. And finally we decided that IRIS 5 should take place in Stockholm. The main organisers were not Janis Bubenko or Mats Lundeborg, but Göran Goldkuhl and Kalle Lyytinen, who somehow happened to be in Stockholm as a guest researcher. If we could not make Swedes to organise IRIS in Sweden, we should send a Finn to do it. The same story was repeated in 1982. IRIS 6 was located in Øystese by a group from the University of Bergen. The main organisers were Harald Terje Gaupholm and Markku Nurminen, who had received a chair in Bergen in 1982. After these two successful implantations IRIS could return back to Finland: Helsinki School of Economics and professor Markku Sääksjärvi invited us to Hanaholmen in the vicinity of Helsinki. The remaining piece of this infiltration project was Denmark. Fortunately, the IRIS tradition already had attracted influential Danes like Niels Bjørn-Andersen and Lars Mathiasen. Lars then had an easy decision to host IRIS 8 as an appendix to the decennial Aarhus conference in 1985. Now a whole round with one meeting in each of the four

countries was completed and it was just natural for the Lund group and Hans-Erik Nissen to take us into Båstad in 1986.

We now have labels to the two first four-year-periods

1978 -1981 Initiation in Finland

1982 – 1985 Getting Scandinavian

The next four years 1986 -1989 could be called as Getting International. IRIS received participants from Northern Germany, the Netherlands, Great Britain and the United States of America (XEROX research unit). (Do not ask me why this inclusion seems to follow the boundary between protestant and catholic cultures.)

The fifth olympiade 1990 -1993 may be called the period of Getting Institutionalised. The Scandinavian journal was consolidated and the IRIS association was established. The institutionalisation was quite essential by offering continuity to the activities.

Since then the tradition has been strong. It has tolerated serious internal conflicts, such as what is/is not Scandinavian research or the meaning and significance of trade-union related work) as well as external catastrophes (1993 the tax-free sale within EU was finished). The continuous problem of attracting more senior people to attend has found different solutions, currently the tandem-structure with IRIS and SCIS seems to be a promising idea.

The themes and contents during all these years have covered practically all subfields of information systems research. What then makes IRIS so special that people want to attend again and again. One distinctive feature is in its atmosphere that allows to come to the conference with new and fresh ideas and receive positive critique. Mainstream research produces duplicates of earlier research and confirms the old wisdom. In this conference I have learned that the most promising categories of research are those that introduce new inventions and innovations not presented earlier and approaches that are in conflict with the traditional wisdom and theories. I still remember the positive flow that I experienced when I started my own PhD project by taking the two volume monograph by Langefors (Theoretical Analysis of Information Systems) that had the status next to the Bible and marking with a red pencil all the points where he was wrong (in my mind). Critical research is one of the cornerstones of the IRIS. If you are not satisfied in the work that conceptualises information systems as a structured collection of boxes and arrows, you have arrived to the correct place by attending IRIS. I hope that we share the desire of having something more than this mechanistic view. Here we are invited to think and talk outside the box.

There has been debates in terms of, to name just a few

Situated action

Rigour and relevance

Participative design

Computers in context

Socio-technical theories and methods

Language action

Organisational design and implementation

Different paradigms

Politics

Tacit knowledge

Practice

Culture

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And many others. I believe that I can summarise: PEOPLE MATTER!

I decided to summarise what IRIS is and has been for me personally rather than to list details after details. I finish by giving a detail that has had a special place in my memories, not saying that it has been the best IRIS. It was the organisation of IRIS 23, where the organisers provided us with a daily conference newspaper, conference tattooing material and many other gadgets. They even had brewed a conference beer with a conference label on the bottle. I think that this is a right moment to suggest a toast for the future success of IRIS!