A Special Issue Editorial

Distributed PD: Challenges and opportunities

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Participatory design (PD) has been one of the important contributions of Scandinavian researchers to information systems (Floyd et al. 1989). For a considerable amount of time, the importance and usefulness of the approach has been illustrated during the design of computer systems for work. The Scandinavian Journal of Information Systems (SJIS) serves as an important contribution to the history and development of the approach. Already in its first volume published in 1989, PD research was represented. The PD approach focuses on the collaboration between designers and users, supporting direct involvement of users in the design process itself while allowing designers to participate in the users’ world (cf., Kyng 1998).

Globalisation and organisational networks—and the implicit distribution coming along with this—increasingly determine software development (Audy et al. 2004). The distribution of collaboration in design and development processes has become a key challenge for PD, especially when one considers participation that was originally developed with a focus on co-located design activities. This view of activity was developed to allow users and designers to collaborate face-to-face, building on their mutual learning through the design process. However, the involvement of a large number of users and other stakeholders who may be distributed across time, space and organisational structures, has challenged developed PD research and activities.

Distributed design teams are by no means a new aspect in participatory design. A variety of research work reports on projects that face some kind of distributedness (e.g., Divitini et al. 2000; Irestig et al. 2002, Bødker et al. 2004). Moreover, support of such distributed projects,
in terms of an effective facilitation of communication and knowledge sharing in distributed settings, has become one of the main considerations in the field of computer supported cooperative work (CSCW). Although PD does not necessarily argue for, or include, computers in order to support group work during design (Bannon 1993), the two communities could benefit from each other (Kensing and Blomberg 1998).

In addition other research domains like open source software development (OSSD) (Barcellini et al. 2008) or distributed software development (DSD) (Heeks et al. 2001; Damian et al. 2003; Coar 2004, Gumm 2006) explore the complexities and challenges related to distributed people and groups. However, although this research has developed a considerable body of knowledge, the understanding about distinct challenges of and solutions for participatory design in distributed environments is still evolving.

This SJIS special issue on distributed PD, has its origins in a series of events including: two workshops conducted at NordiCHI 2006 and CHI 2008 and a panel discussion held at PDC 2008. Our intention for the workshops and the panel was to enable researchers with this joint interest to meet and share experiences and knowledge. Several interesting articles from research and practice were presented at these workshops, enabling creative and encouraging discussions among participants.

The call for papers for this special issue attracted 13 submissions and we are pleased to note that a variety of European countries were represented by the submitting authors such as Greece, Italy, United Kingdom, Germany, Belgium, and the Scandinavian countries Sweden, Norway and Finland. This illustrates the widespread and ongoing interest regarding Distributed PD in Europe, but also a special attention among the Scandinavian countries. Through three rounds of double-blind reviews, three papers were selected for publication in this special issue. They include experiences gathered from extensive distributed PD project research as well as theoretical reflections about PD’s relation to other research areas.

Longitudinal case studies provide the possibility to reflect on changing project settings and the evolution of distribution within a project. The first two papers of this special issue report on very different case projects in which a software system, initially developed for a particular user group, has been adapted to a growing range of use contexts. Such expansion requires coping with the diversity of roles and cultures. In the first article entitled “Distributed development to enable user participation: Multilevel design in the HISP network”, Ola Hodne Titlestad, Knut Staring and Jørn Braa explore distributed participation within and across countries through a long term, globally targeted effort of networked action research projects. They introduce and discuss the concepts of scaffolding and boundary spanners as approaches to cope with the geographical and organisational distribution and diversity of roles.

The development and expansion of the domain application also requires new approaches to cope with requirements emerging from different contexts of usage. In the second article entitled “Intercontextual distributed participatory design: Communicating design philosophy and enriching user experience”, Hartmut Obendorf, Monique Janneck and Matthias Finck report on a project in which a software application has been developed for a growing amount of use contexts, ranging from universities and schools across freelancer networks and other kinds of firms and organisations. The authors introduce two new methods, intercontextual user workshops and commented case studies that support the participation of users and mutual understanding across different communities of practice.
Finally, the challenges accompanied by distribution are not limited to Participatory Design but arise whenever collaborative methods are applied. In the third and final article of the special issue, entitled “Furthering distributed participative design: Unlocking the walled gardens”, Claudia Loebbecke and Philip Powell analyse the similarities between participatory design, design science and action research. By thoroughly analysing 15 papers from these research approaches, they demonstrate how they match in research contributions, roots and methodological guidelines. The authors argue that insight into some of the issues raised by participatory design in distributed contexts may arise if PD looks outside of its ”walled garden”.

Given distributed participatory design’s growing importance, the reflection of existing participatory methods, experiences with new methods and the connection to other important research areas are required. Although significant progress has taken place in the area of distributed PD, much still needs to be done.

With this special issue we hope the knowledge and expertise among researchers and practitioners will reach further than before; hopefully, this is the departure and not the end. It is with pride that we hand this special issue over to you and hope that you will enjoy the reading it as much as we have preparing this valuable set of papers.

At last but not the least, we would like to acknowledge the important work of our reviewers for this special issue: Andrea Herrman, Andrew Warr, Andy Dearden, Anna Croon Fors, Birgitta Bergvall-Kåreborn, Brendon Clark, Charlotte Wiberg, Chris Roast, Christina Mörtberg, Daniela Damian, Erik Stolterman, Jonny Holmström, José Abdelnour-Nocera, Marcel Christ, Mikael Wiberg, Monique Janneck, Peter Wright, Sari Kujala, Steve Sawyer, Tony Gorschek, and Victor Kaptelinin. Thank you for your hard and quality work.

We would also like to take this opportunity to thank Andy Dearden and Andy Warr who have been co-workers at the workshops, and the invited panellists at PDC 2008: Jeanette Blomberg, Tone Bratteteig, Jose Abdelnour-Nocera, and Gerhard Fischer.

We would like to send our greatest gratitude to the participants of the two workshops; without you there would not have been this special issue.

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### References


