

What Happens When Designers Don't Play by the Rules: towards a model of opportunistic behaviour in design

A. Khushalani, R. Smith, S. Howard

Abstract

It is being recognised increasingly in the scientific literature that real world design problem solving is non hierarchical, being characterised by a strategy, termed 'opportunism', whereby designers discover and/or adapt their problem solving goals and activities, in response to the environment in which that problem exists. This paper explores the concept of opportunism more formally than has hitherto been attempted. We adopt an approach (which we term "TheoryBuilder") which is a hybrid of the theory testing and theory building approaches of the Lancaster Soft Systems Methodology to generate an initial model of opportunistic behaviour, to be refined by subsequent iterative comparison with the existing literature and empirical studies. The utility of the initial model is demonstrated by constructing a list of the characteristics of opportunistic behaviour in this initial model, and then using it to analyse a sample verbal protocol collected from an empirical study observed by the authors. Initial results are very promising, supporting the need for more comprehensive examination and refinement of the model. Possible future research is discussed.

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