This special issue of the *International Journal of Technology and Human Interaction* presents a collation of articles exploring the application of postmodern methods in the context of human-computer interaction. Postmodernism, and by implication any possibility for postmodern methods, have become increasingly marginalised topics in most academic circles. Postmodernism, it seems, has become the invisible and unvoiced “other,” stripped of the intellectual power it once both critiqued and briefly achieved. But just as postmodern theory originally and variously argued for the death of history, various forms of ahistoricism or recognition for the constant recycling of grand narratives we again have an opportunity to revisit the political passion, appreciate the fragmentation of everyday life and celebrate subjectivity as just a few small aspects identified as being integral parts of the postmodern condition. That we still live in postmodern times was recently evidenced on the front page of the *Daily Telegraph*, which offered “proof” that 2006 was just 1976 again.

From an intellectual point of view, the current academic fascination with “methods,” in any form, provides the opportunity to re-examine the potentially fruitful and equally rocky intellectual terrain of postmodernism. This collection reveals the rich plethora of linked postmodern and distinct ideas that can emerge given sufficient freedom to actively engage with challenging thoughts. This is a freedom we often too readily take for granted. Theoried consideration of the contemporary world is not immune from the impact of digital technologies. Among the lessons of postmodernism is the need to recognise how artefacts of technology impact what we commit to print or HTML and how these are judged. We can egosurf (.org) our colleagues for amusement, but when do we also pause to consider whether this is the shape of future research assessment exercises that university funding bodies require?

Discussions and consideration of postmodernism have largely been dismissed in mainstream business and management studies. However, the periphery of mainstream academia ideas that could be labelled “radical,” provocative or even simply “theoried” are still discussed, including postmodernism (Gergen & Thatchenjery, 2004). When the theme of this special issue was first discussed in 2004-2005, all European funding calls for research grants included consideration for the development of new and innovative methodological practices and techniques. We began our editorial discussions with the observa-
tion that a shift had occurred in the way that “society” (including the meaning burdenered term itself) is studied. We also noted the apparent demise of what would be labelled postmodern theory, while at the same time we recognised that one of the key inspirations for postmodern theory—the endless cycle of change within contemporary society and its intimate association with digital technology—continues unabated. We felt this combination of postmodern experience and the experiential impact it has on individual actors must still play an influential role upon sociological and technical studies. By implication the continued persistence of this postmodern condition does not justify the effacement of the “postmodern turn” in research, but rather necessitates new and further debate within the complex rubric of “postmodern” method and thought. For example, there is a significant increase in the use of “ethnographic” studies within the context of technologically enabled communities, but a noticeable silence surrounding the original colonialist motivations for this research method or the subjective impact of technologically driven data gathering techniques that masquerade as culturally “neutral” and politically unbiased. For these reasons examining what postmodern methods are, or could be, and locating any contemporary applications of these methods are desperately needed. The articles chosen for this special issue are lucid examples of how academics and practitioners are still drawing on the theoretical foundations of what can now, perhaps ironically, be described as the postmodern research tradition(s).

The “postmodern turn” in research continues to be redefined (Brown, 1990, p. 196). Gergen and Thatchenjery (2004) present a justification as to why the turn will be useful for further critical work. They claim that “postmodernism as a theoretical tenet strives to avoid the epistemological and historical crutches of positivism, universalism and determinism.” These “isms” largely represent the foundations of contemporary Western thought and impact researchers and the specific methods available to them that enable the conduct of research. Under the influence of the postmodern turn the dilemma of being bound to our intellectual ancestors has been described as an ad hoc rubric from which appropriate methodological choices must be selected. A realist approach, in contrast, assumes that the account given by an interviewee during an interview represents an ethnographic “reality.” The postmodernist perspective pays closer attention to the power relationships between interviewer-interviewee and considers the interview not as a neutral data collection tool, but rather as the active interaction between interviewer and interviewee(s), resulting in negotiated and contextual data (Fontana & Frey, 2000).

Pursuing this thought further, the interview method provides a very flexible method of data collection, allowing different types of interviews to be employed for different types of research questions, whether these are specifically focused questions or more general, broader issues (King, 2004). The interview is a widely accepted, familiar and arguably “easy” method, leading to some scholars commenting that we live in an “interview society” (Silverman, 1993; Fontana & Frey, 2000). King (2004) also suggests that the qualitative interview method is appropriate for complex situations where different levels of meaning need to be explored.

A structured interview is fairly inflexible, and the interviewer asks a number of questions in a predefined sequence to an interviewee, rarely deviating from this schedule. What this type of “rigour” provides is the illusion of neutral data collection, as the interviewer does not visibly influence answers. At the other end of the spectrum are unstructured interviews, where no a priori categories that may limit the field of inquiry are imposed (Fontana & Frey, 2000). It allows rich data to be gathered with no restrictions, but has the disadvantage
of obtaining masses of seemingly irrelevant data. In most research protocols this makes the interview an apparently wasted effort and at the very least produces an unmanageably vast dataset. Semistructured interviews are considered to be an appropriate technique that offers advantages of both structured and unstructured interviewing and is often employed in organisational research. The interview gathers information around specific themes and issues, but with flexibility for the researcher to pursue issues that might emerge and prove useful (Lee, 1999). This style (as the distinction requires no grander titles) of interview requires the researcher to have strong interviewing skills and the ability to steer the conversation back on track if it veers off. However, the postmodern turn also asks us to question the intellectual and political focus and purpose of research, how are we to know, and whether we discard the “trivial” during the research process (Taussig, 1993). The articles presented in this special issue explore exactly the conundrums raised by the issue of selecting an appropriate interview approach at a much broader level. Utilising a variety of perspectives, the articles present the multiplicity of intellectual and methodological propositions that emerge when the boundaries of “traditional” thought are challenged. These articles discuss and explode the dominant paradigmatic oeuvre surrounding the construction of understanding and knowledge, the multiplicity of perspectives that inform both researcher and practitioner in daily life, and the reflexive potential for the organisation when it shifts way from rational market-oriented outcomes demanded by modernity.

Isomaki explores thought and the potential of human-centred design. Initial reader reaction to this article may well be “How or in what way is this article a postmodern exploration?” An informed reader may respond that this article represents the purest form of functionalist determination by utilising a psychological approach to explore the potential for human-centred design in computation. At a superficial level, this would be true if this was the sole focus of the study. However, in the spirit of postmodern writing and thinking, the article posits so much more than this. Postmodern thought was always diffuse in its advocacy for movement away from human-centred understandings of “reality.” Among the propositions of the reflective turn is the need to critique ego-centred research while also recognising how difficult it is for the researcher to ever entirely escape solipsism. The discourse of the “west” inevitably forces us to return to ourselves as the primary informant understanding the world with understanding inspired by the combined traditions of religion and science.

Isomaki’s article explores the notion of “reality” formation that is crafted by the computer designer. By exploring the transgressive notion of emotions and thought and the multiplicity of constructed experience, we are asked to consider whether human-centred design is actually the norm. Isomaki postulates that “of essential importance is the nature of Information Systems (IS) designers’ insight into human characteristics and behaviour that are essential with respect to the IS-user relationship.” Inscribing the “user” as the active subject and wrenching the essentialism of technological design from the technician is a call to political action imbued throughout this article. Isomaki subscribes to an inclusive and constantly active relationship between the potential inputs the designers may draw upon themselves in their daily interactions. This article is innovative in its employment of a focal shift away from a single directional relationship between supposedly passive technology and its developer engaged in the design of digital artefacts. Isomaki illustrates an alternative proposition in which she asserts that computer designers must draw on human qualities when they craft technology.

Greenhill and Fletcher, in a similar
manner to Isomaki, tout a shift in focus away from singularities of understanding to a more holistic understanding of information systems practice. This requires a conceptual movement away from linear and time-orientated methodological practices currently dominating information systems research to a multidimensional and non-linear analysis of the “event.” Greenhill and Fletcher propose that research methods can move beyond temporal allocations of process to include elements of the mundane and unexpected. This article outlines a clearly postmodern theoretical foundation nuanced by the critiques of earlier postmodern works and draws upon Lagopoulos (1993, p. 256) to claim that, “although postmodernism has been posited as antithetical to the modernist project, the relationship is not simply a structuralist dichotomy.” The article explores the necessity of structuring the research process as a continuous juxtaposition of observed events out of which the cultural logic of organisational activity emerges. Ultimately, we are asked as readers to question the possibility of complex interacting trivial, semitrivial and essential social processes being mapped under the rubric of management processes to an outcome that is both determinant and rational. Greenhill and Fletcher argue that IS research can profitably draw upon the tradition of situationalism to include, “the integrative blend of moments that constitute everyday life, the non-linearity of experience, the illogic of expectations, the indeterminant acceleration and deceleration of personal temporality and the moments of the unexpected or unforeseen.” They question the micromanagement of the research process and, like Isomaki, challenge the dominance of business and organisation “understandings” of human and computer interaction.

A consistent theme emerges in this collection in the authors’ advocacy for widening what we conventionally understand as human computer interaction. Jones et al. explore organisational knowledge and the evolutionary tradition of organisational knowledge. Jones et al. state that “postmodernity is understood as the abandonment of the model of society as moving towards rational division of labour meeting the natural needs of rational man.” The modernist tradition advocates bound and coherent rules, structures, regulations, goals and shared rationality that emphasises performance-enhanced efficiencies (Cooper & Burrell, 1988). Jones et al. argue that the contemporary organisation must move away from the singular goal of delivering a product toward becoming a dynamic multilayered provider of flexible solutions. They draw upon empirical examples to illustrate the dynamic processes necessary for an individualised and solution-oriented outcome in a technology-enabled environment. Jones, et al similarly advocate alteration to “traditional” postmodern concerns and instead utilise a potlatch approach outlined by Greenhill and Fletcher, while also drawing on the traditions of Polanyi (1969) and theories of tacit knowledge to debate the merits of rationality and predictability within information technology uptake and the evolutionary usage of technology within organisational contexts.

The final article in this special issue draws more closely on the theories and traditions of postmodernism in its experimentation with the relationship between humans and technology. Hohmann introduces a phenomenon he describes as emotional digitisation, arguing that such a phenomenon can lessen the gap between humans and computer and should become the future of information systems usage and design. Hohmann draws on the example of BrandLand Autostadt to illustrate how “the functional elements of our daily life must subordinate themselves to our principles of thought and aesthetic.” Technology and human conditions blend and entwine so as to liberate a restrictive existence for both.

Postmodernism, in its more extreme expression, has been heavily critiqued for
its propensity towards nihilism, fatalism and self-centred existentialism. However, with the benefits of careful critique and increasingly nuanced understandings of technology, it seems that the postmodern ideas originally regarded as both challenging and useful should not be automatically discarded because of a small subset of particular writings. The importance of a “postmodern” understanding is the way in which the researcher, developer and practitioner can contextualise and understand their daily life. The articles in this special issue restart the process of illustrating the potential a postmodern sensibility can provide. Postmodernism at its most useful illustrates the political potential for advocating inclusivity and a widened understanding of the world and actions around us.

REFERENCES


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