

## Interview: The cellphone anthropologist

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Jason Palmer

Most of us take mobile phones for granted. Not so for **Jan Chipchase**, a design researcher for Nokia, who travels the globe exploring how people use their mobile devices, discovering how to make them better, how to reach the billions of people who don't own a phone - and learning a whole lot about people along the way. **Jason Palmer** caught up with him in Japan - by phone of course - and found that nothing about the mobile phone is as straightforward as it seems

[Watch a slideshow of Chipchase's research images](#)

### What exactly do you do?

I specialise in taking teams of designers, psychologists, usability experts, sociologists and ethnographers into the field. It's called "corporate anthropology", but personally I'm more comfortable with "design research", because I'm not an anthropologist by training. We're interested in design and in how what we design affects people's lives. The tough part of the job is using the data we collect to inform and inspire how my colleagues think, and in turning this research into new ideas.

### But you started out studying economics.

My first job out of university was designing software for an economics project, but I realised that I didn't know what I was doing, so I took a master's in user interface design. In 2000 a job in the usability group at Nokia came up. At the time I didn't even own a mobile phone. The remit was to carry out "user experience research" - they wanted to ask some really basic questions. So we pitched a year-long international study on what objects people carry with them and why.

### How do phones fit in?

The common denominator between cultures, regardless of age, gender or context is: keys, money and, if you own one, a mobile phone. Why those three objects? Without wanting to sound hyperbolic, essentially it boils down to survival. Keys provide access to warmth and shelter, money is a very versatile tool that can buy food, transport and so on. A mobile phone, people soon realise, is a great tool for recovering from emergency situations, especially if the first two fail.

### You've found that mobile phones do more than provide a means of communication?

We've started to see the mobile phone being used as the primary form of projecting your identity. For instance, if you live in a community with no street signs, because your street is off the map or not officially recognised, you find people are writing their phone numbers above their door.

### How do you respond to people who say you are just trying to thrust Nokia phones into the hands of people who don't yet own one - often because they're too poor?

In the past few years, we've done a lot of work with people in so-called emerging markets. A mobile phone is just as valid for a farmer on the outskirts of New Delhi as a banker in New York. What we've discovered is that for people on the lowest rungs of society, the mobile phone actually has a disproportionately great benefit to them compared with the banker in New York, because they have fewer alternatives. We do research in such communities because these are the places in which we can



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best learn about the kinds of mobile use that will become mainstream in other parts of the world. We find these communities to be incredibly innovative in the way they use their mobile phones.

### What uses surprised you?

In a country like Uganda, most mobile phones are prepay. What we saw was that people are using their phones as a kind of money transfer system. They would buy prepaid credit in the city, ring up a phone kiosk operator in a village, read out the number associated with that credit so that the kiosk operator could top up their own phone, then ask that the credit be passed on to someone in the village - say, their sister - in cash.

### Do people customise the phones too?

In some countries people are incredibly price-conscious and measure costs in seconds and cents. In Ghana we saw that people tend to buy two or more SIM cards, one for each network provider. When they're calling a number belonging to a particular network, they'd use that company's SIM. Some guys have a small metal sleeve that has a little bit of circuitry in. They can take your SIM cards, strip away the plastic, squeeze two of the SIM circuit boards into one and fit that new dual card into a phone.

In most of the developing world there is an informal repair culture run by "street hacks" who learn how to make phones last longer than their natural lifetime. Four years ago in India you could find badly printed DIY phone repair manuals in English, Hindi and Chinese, but two years later they had been turned into high-quality computerised versions. Basically, if a way of changing, fixing or improving a popular model of mobile phone is discovered in any of the hacking communities around the world on Monday, by Friday it'll be on the streets of somewhere like Ghana.

### With this level of informal innovation going on, can you bring anything extra to the table?

I'm not going to give you the bland corporate answer - "we do this research and then six months later a product drops off the factory line that perfectly reflects our vision" - because the world is much messier and more interesting than that. But, for instance, we did a study on phone sharing in Uganda and Indonesia, and within a year - which is really quick when you're talking about hardware changes - we had two products out which support multiple address books, allowing people to share a device within a family or a company while giving them a degree of privacy.

### Many potential phone owners in the developing world are illiterate. What about them?

There are around 800 million illiterate people worldwide, according to the UN, so we have carried out a lot of research into how people who can't read communicate using mobile phones. We fed that back to the device designers, so the phones could be designed to work better. But we didn't want to create a phone specifically for those who can't read - they're not going to buy this kind of phone because of the social stigma it would carry.

### Your blog Future Perfect ("about the collision of people, society and technology") includes a lot of your musings about what you see on your travels, but poses more questions than it answers.

I'm pretty bad at shoehorning life into what amounts to lifeless journal and conference submissions. I mean, how do you take the essence of what's out there, the richness of life, and put it on paper? I don't think you can. The motivation behind the blog is that I do something that totally fascinates me, and I'm lucky to be well resourced and to work with very talented people. I want to be able to communicate some of that. It's not about saying what the answers are; it's about asking the questions and maybe some of those will stick in people's minds and they'll ask those questions in their own contexts.

### Do you ever go anywhere without a mobile phone?

Sure. When I'm mountain climbing and when I want to spend uninterrupted time with close friends and family.

[Watch a slideshow of Chipchase's research images](#)

#### Profile

Of English and German parentage, 38-year-old Jan Chipchase grew up in London and studied economics at London Guildhall University, going on to do a master's in user interface design in 1992. He then worked at the Institute for Learning and Research Technology at the University of Bristol. In 1999 he moved to Japan, where he still lives, and joined Nokia's usability group. He became a member of the Nokia design group last year.

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Jan Chipchase's talk at the TED conference 2007

<http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks/view/id/190>

Mobile phone lifeline for world's poor, BBC news

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/6339671.stm>

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