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Course "Empirical Evaluation in Informatics"

Introduction

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- The notion of Empirical Evaluation
- Theory, Construction, Empiricism
- Status of empiricism in Informatics
- Hypothetical examples
- Quality criteria:
  - credibility
  - relevance
- Note on scale types

"Empirische Bewertung in der Informatik"

Einführung

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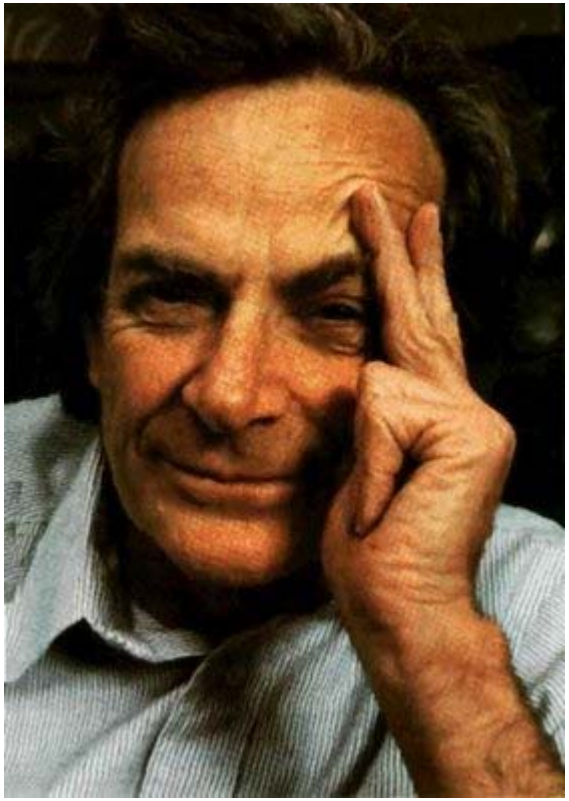
- Begriff
- Theorie, Konstruktion, Empirie
- Status der Empirie in der Informatik
- Hypothetische Anwendungsbeispiele
- Qualitätsmaßstäbe:
  - Glaubwürdigkeit
  - Relevanz
- Hinweis: Skalentypen

Science

- Science is the belief in the ignorance of experts.
  - Richard Feynman (1918-1988)
    (The pleasure of finding things out,
    1999, p.187)



  - (Ignorance: Unwissen)

Technology

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- For a successful technology,
  reality must take precedence over public relations,
  for nature cannot be fooled.
  - Richard Feynman
    (last sentence of the Rogers Commission Report into the Challenger Crash, Appendix F: *Personal Observations on the Reliability of the Shuttle*)
    - http://science.ksc.nasa.gov/shuttle/missions/51-l/docs/rogers-commission/Appendix-F.txt

- (Things are as they are.
  Just claiming something does not make it true.)

"Empirical" / "empirisch"

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- Based on observation
  - (greek-latin origin)

- As opposed to being based on
  - theoretical considerations
  - intuition
  - random selection

"Evaluation" / "Bewertung"

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- "to evaluate": auswerten, bewerten

- Assigning measures of goodness to something
- The purpose is typically making some kind of decision:
  - deciding **yes or no**
    - Should I do it or not (in my context)?
    - e.g. starting or stopping a project, introducing a technology or not, etc.
  - **selecting** among solution candidates
    - Which one is best for my purposes?
    - e.g. systems, methods
  - **understanding** characteristics and priorities
    - What characteristics does a certain method/tool have in my context?
    - Which of these are most relevant for me?
    - e.g. in business process automation, user interface design, etc.

"Informatics" / "Informatik"

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- The science and engineering of information and information processing systems

- Very broad area

Note:

- Many of the same principles presented in this course can be applied to other areas as well
- Hence, this course is relevant far beyond where software is created or selected

Partitioning Informatics: Technical, Applied, Theoretical

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Work in Informatics is often discriminated into being either

- Technical ("Technische Informatik")
  - having to do more or less closely with hardware
- Applied ("Praktische Informatik")
  - having to do mostly with software
- Theoretical ("Theoretische Informatik")
  - having to do mostly with mathematics
- Furthermore: Applications ("Angewandte Informatik")
  - having to do mostly with software in actual usage contexts

- Problem: Discrimination hardly relevant for practitioners
- Problem: The boundaries have long disappeared

Partitioning again: Theory, Construction, Empiricism (T,C,E)

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A better discrimination would be **by work method**:

- Theory
  - produces formalisms, derives results about them, revolves around logical issues
- Construction
  - produces systems designs, constructs systems, revolves around practical issues
- Empiricism
  - produces observations of systems and interprets them, revolves around behavior in and of the real world

- At any one time, any work in Informatics is primarily in only one of these modes
  - whether practitioner work or research work
  - but good work switches mode frequently

T, C, E: What they are used for

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(Our focus is solving practical Informatics problems)

- Theory:
  - structuring and understanding a domain
  - if done well, can much simplify construction
    - "There is nothing more practical than a good theory"
- Construction:
  - build a useful technical artifact, such as a software system
- Empiricism:
  - in an early phase: Understanding requirements
  - in a later phase: Understanding the characteristics of a system
    - This is the topic of the present course!

Example 1: Algorithms

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1. Theory
   - Specify the problem to be solved
     - e.g. linear programming: minimize linear function given constraints
   - Specify an algorithm for solving it (e.g. simplex algorithm)
   - Maybe prove the algorithm correct, etc.

2. Construction
   - Implement the algorithm as a concrete program
     - often much longer than the theoretical algorithm because of optimizations, input/output, limitations of machine arithmetic, error handling, external interfaces, etc.

3. Empiricism
   - Determine actual characteristics of the program for different kinds of inputs
     - execution time, memory behavior, etc.
     - for heuristic or approximation algorithms: quality of results

Example 2: Software design methods

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1. Empiricism
   - Determine the weaknesses of current design methods
2. Theory
   - Maybe define some new terminology
   - Maybe pose new design principles
3. Construction
   - Formulate a new design method
   - Perhaps construct support tools
4. Empiricism
   - Evaluate the behavior of the method for concrete problems
   - Probably in comparison to other methods

Informatics until recently

- Until the 1990s, Informatics research publications were often short on empirical evaluation
  - they often provided designs of systems
  - and claims for their properties
  - but little or no no data on actual behavior

- In comparison, other engineering fields were much better in this respect

- Tichy, Lukowicz, Prechelt, Heinz: "Experimental Evaluation in Computer Science: A quantitative study", Journal of Systems and Software 28(1), 1995.

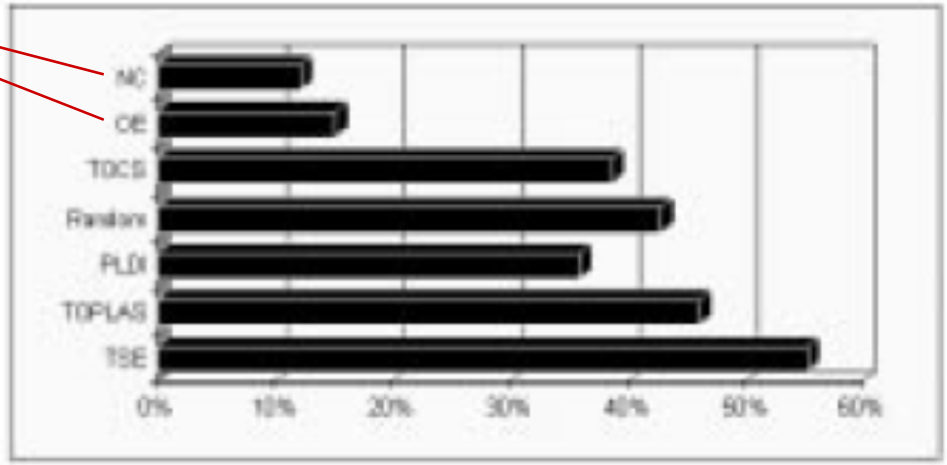

Figure 5: The percentage of design & modeling articles without any experimental evaluation.

Informatics today

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- This situation has become a lot better
- It is now generally understood that proposed systems and methods need to be evaluated empirically

- Compared to research, practitioners' work has always been more empirical
  - However, evaluation was often very implicit, hardly conscious and often not very systematical.
  - Systematic empirical evaluation is becoming more and more common there as well

A glimpse of the improvement

- M. Zelkowitz and D. Wallace: "Experimental Models for Validating Technology", IEEE Computer 31(5), May 1998.

- Categorizes 612 research articles in software engineering (from 1985, 1990, 1995) according to the empirical evaluation method that they used (if any)

- 2 of the 14 categories describe articles providing
  - no proof ("no experimentation") or
  - only visibly biased proof ("assertion")
  - 1985: 67% of the articles were in one of these two
  - 1995: 47% of the articles were in one of these two
  - still far from great, but a big improvement
  - has presumably continued to improve

Frequency of evaluation methods (in SW Eng.)

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Table 2. Classification of 612 evaluated papers.

Method	1985 ICSE	1985 *IEEE Software*	1985 TSE	1990 ICSE	1990 *IEEE Software*	1990 TSE	1995 ICSE	1995 *IEEE Software*	1995 TSE	Total
Not applicable	6	6	3	4	16	2	5	7	1	50
No experimentation	16	11	56	8	8	41	10	3	14	167
Replicated	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	3	6
Synthetic	3	1	1	0	1	4	0	0	2	12
Dynamic analysis	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	4	7
Simulation	2	0	10	0	0	11	1	1	6	31
Project monitoring	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Case study	5	2	12	7	6	6	4	6	10	58
Assertion	12	13	54	12	19	42	4	14	22	192
Field study	1	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	2	7
Literature search	1	1	3	1	5	1	0	3	2	17
Legacy data	1	1	2	2	0	2	1	1	1	11
Lessons learned	7	5	4	1	4	8	5	7	8	49
Static analysis	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2	4
Yearly totals	56	40	147	35	60	122	32	43	77	612

Examples

- Let us look what empirical evaluations may be used for
- and what approach we might use in each case:

  - Scenario 1: Introducing inspections in a SW project organization
  - Scenario 2: Switching the development world
  - Scenario 3: Selecting an Application Server product

In each case, we look at:

- What are the results of interest?
- What are the constraints?
- What are the most promising evaluation approaches?

Scenario 1: Introducing inspections

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- A SW organization is thinking about introducing inspections into their process
- Constraint: is an IT service company doing information systems projects for varying customers
  - requirements inspections, design inspections, code inspections
- Interest:
  - which and how many defects will be found?
  - cost of inspections
  - how much effort is saved by finding the defects early?
    - return-on-investment (ROI)

(Scenario 1)
Code Inspections

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- Possible approach:
  - inspect a number of modules; do not fix the defects found
  - measure testing and debugging cost of the same modules
  - (A **quasi-experiment** approach)

- Difficulties
  - What if author and tester are the same person?
    - unfair disadvantage for inspectors
  - What if measurement is too difficult?
    - due to interruptions, mixing with other tasks (e.g. debug with fix), etc.

- Other approaches
  - search the literature on this subject
  - controlled experiment: many people inspect or test the same program

(Scenario 1)
Requirements and design inspections

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- Approach:
  - ???

- Difficulties:
  - Cannot afford not to fix problems found
  - If we fix them, cannot measure would-be cost for comparison
  - Estimates may be very imprecise

Scenario 2:
Switching from C to Embedded Java

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- A SW organization is producing car control devices
  - motor control, ABS, ESP, distance control, etc.
- Development is done in C (since many years)
- The organization considers switching to Embedded Java
  - object-oriented rather than procedural,
    garbage collection rather than manual memory mgmt,
    VM rather than bare machine, etc.
- Interest:
  - What/how much would our engineers have to learn?
  - What would become better or easier?
  - What would become worse or more difficult?
  - What risks are involved?

(Scenario 2)
A laboratory study approach

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- Approach:
  - Select one team, let them build one prior system again
    - or a part of it
  - Evaluate relative to the experience from the original project
  - (A **case study** approach)

- Problems:
  - The team may be too inexperienced with Embedded Java
  - Many important differences can hardly be observed, because fundamental problems with requirements or design need not be solved again
    - (Alternative: build the system in both languages side-by-side; also a case study approach)
  - The retrospective view of the previous project may be too imprecise

(Scenario 2)
Field study approach

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- Approach:
  - Introduce Embedded Java in a (real) pilot project
  - Compare to 'usual' projects
  - (A **case study** approach)

- Problems:
  - The issues may be too project-specific for a sound comparison
  - All participants may be too busy doing the project
    - and will perhaps not really create a useful comparison
  - High risk of project failure (because of lack of experience)
    - Compensating this risk may result in an overly well-staffed, well-budgeted project and produce overly optimistic results

Scenario 3: Selecting an Application Server product

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- A SW organization building distributed information systems wants to start using a Java Enterprise Edition (Java EE) application server

- An application server is a very complex middleware product (a programming platform)
  - Several vendors offer such servers
  - In principle, they all conform to the Java EE standards and should be interchangeable

- Interest (for each product):
  - How scalable and efficient is it?
  - How stable, robust, easy-to-use is it?
  - How will it evolve in the future?

(Scenario 3)
How scalable and efficient is it?

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- Possible approach:
  - Use several existing applications
  - Set them up for load test measurements
  - Measure and compare across the various Application Servers
  - (A **benchmarking** approach)

- Problems:
  - Where to get the applications from
    if this is the first application server we will use?
  - How to make sure each server is configured well?

(Scenario 3)
How stable, robust, easy-to-use is it?

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- Possible approach:
  - Write one application on each server, then port it to all others
  - Protocol all interesting events (defects detected, usability and documentation traps, etc.)
  - Mostly qualitative rather than quantitative
  - (A **case study** or **quasi-experiment** approach)

- Problems:
  - This is a huge effort
  - The results depend critically on the (prior?) knowledge of the engineers
    - many will not apply to routine usage

(Scenario 3)
How will it evolve in the future?

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- Answering this question requires a market analysis
- It cannot be answered technically-empirically

Lessons learned from examples

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- There is a range of different empirical techniques
  - e.g. controlled experiment, quasi-experiment, case study, benchmarking, literature study
- Each evaluation problem has different characteristics
  - Often suggesting a particular technique
  - Or several techniques, with different tradeoffs
- There are usually some difficulties in an evaluation problem that cannot be fully solved
  - Most evaluations are only an approximation to the ideal one
  - But good approximations are *much* more useful than bad ones

Quality measures for empirical evaluations

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The two primary quality dimensions of empirical evaluations are:

- **Credibility**
  - How trustworthy are the results?
- **Relevance**
  - How interested are we in these results?
    How beneficial is it to have them?

- Subsequently we will often assume we are looking at a technical report about the study

Where does credibility come from?

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1. Authors are open towards any result
   - rather than "We will now show that our new X is superior."
2. Setup is described in detail and is easy to understand
3. Work has been performed carefully
4. Description discusses the limitations of the evaluation
   - rather than glossing over even its obvious flaws
5. There is no leap-of-faith or jumping to conclusions
6. Purpose and results are clear
   - rather than vague or, for results, weak
7. Results are easy to grasp ("anschaulich")
   - rather than abstract or contrived

- (Some of these aspects are known as "Internal Validity")

Where does relevance come from?

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1. The target of the evaluation (i.e. the question asked) is of sufficient interest
   - rather than overly specialized

2. We can generalize the results from the specific setup of the evaluation to those situations where we want to apply them
   - this is also known as "External Validity"

Qualitative vs. quantitative

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- Empirical evaluations need not always be quantitative
  - i.e. counting and measuring something; providing numbers, graphs and calculations
- They can also be qualitative
  - describing non-quantifiable characteristics; describing contexts; describing events and their consequences; providing subjective judgements obtained from relevant people
- or can combine both approaches
  - which is almost always a good idea

Qualitative vs. quantitative: Examples

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E.g. for applying a design method:

- **Quantitative questions**:
  - How long does it take?
    - time in minutes
  - How many mistakes are made in the process?
    - number of changes during work
  - How good is the result?
    - number of defects

- Corresponding **qualitative questions**:
  - What activities is the work time spent on?
  - Which kinds of mistake happen frequently? Why?
  - What are the typical kinds of flaws in the result?
    Why do they occur?
    What might be done to prevent them?

A word of warning: scale types

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- An advantage of quantitative data is that it can be processed using mathematical operations
  - This can allow easy summarization or can provide additional insights
- However, not all computations are valid for all kinds of quantitative data
  - The data must be on a sufficient scale type
    - otherwise, an operation may be invalid and not make sense
  - See the next slide

The scale types

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- Categorical/categorial scale (nominal scale)
  - Qualitative data: The values are just names
  - Example: Design method A, design method B
- Ordinal scale (rank scale)
  - Ordered nominal data: One value is larger than another, but we cannot characterize the size of the difference
  - Example: very good, good, OK, not so good, bad
- Difference scale (interval scale)
  - We can compute differences, but 0 is not equal to 'nothing'
  - Example: degrees centigrade
- Ratio scale ("Verhältnisskala")
  - We can compute ratios: 20 is twice as much as 10
  - Most physical quantities, degrees Kelvin
- Absolute scale: 1 is also special (counting)

What often goes wrong with scale types

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- *"Oh, 20 degrees. That's twice as warm as yesterday."*
  - A difference scale is not a ratio scale
  - 20 degrees centigrade is 293 Kelvin.
    That is only 3.5% more than 283 Kelvin.

- When something qualitative is measured using an ordinal scale
  - e.g. *"How well did you like using the tool?"*
    very well, well, OK, not so well, did not like it
  - Often such scales are coded with numbers: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1
  - Wrong (however tempting and common it may be):
    "average satisfaction was 3.8"
  - Even worse: "*average satisfaction in group B was 30% higher than in group A"*
    - This is utter nonsense!
    - Assume you would have coded using 2, 1, 0, -1, -2?

Primary nonsense candidates

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- There are a number of important attributes in informatics for which no good ratio scales are known
- These are frequent places of scale type mis-use

Namely

- Quality
  - And all quality attributes such as comprehensibility, usability, portability, maintainability etc. etc,
- Complexity

"There's more than one way to do it"

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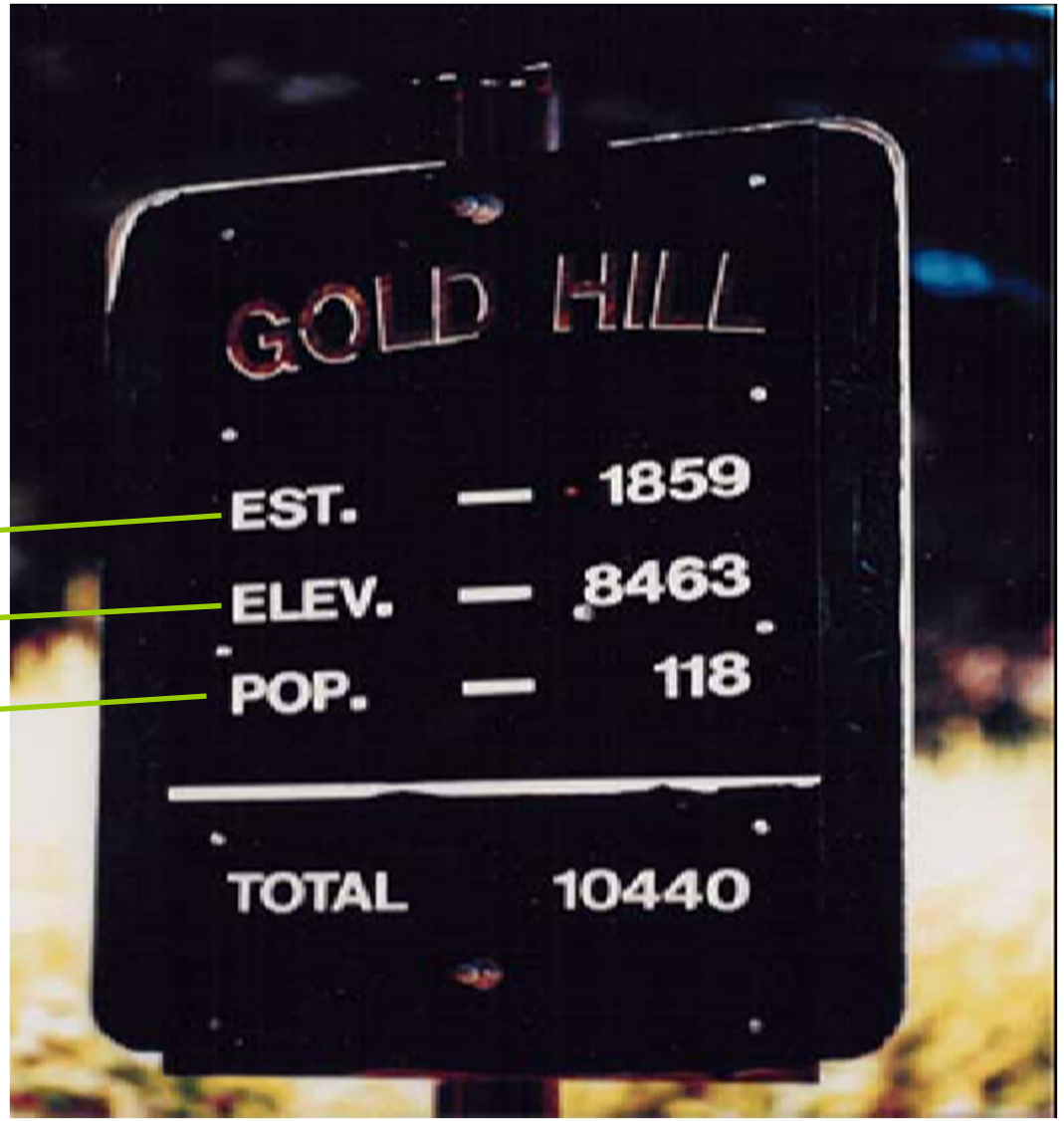
- Even if you do have a ratio scale, things may go wrong:



Summary

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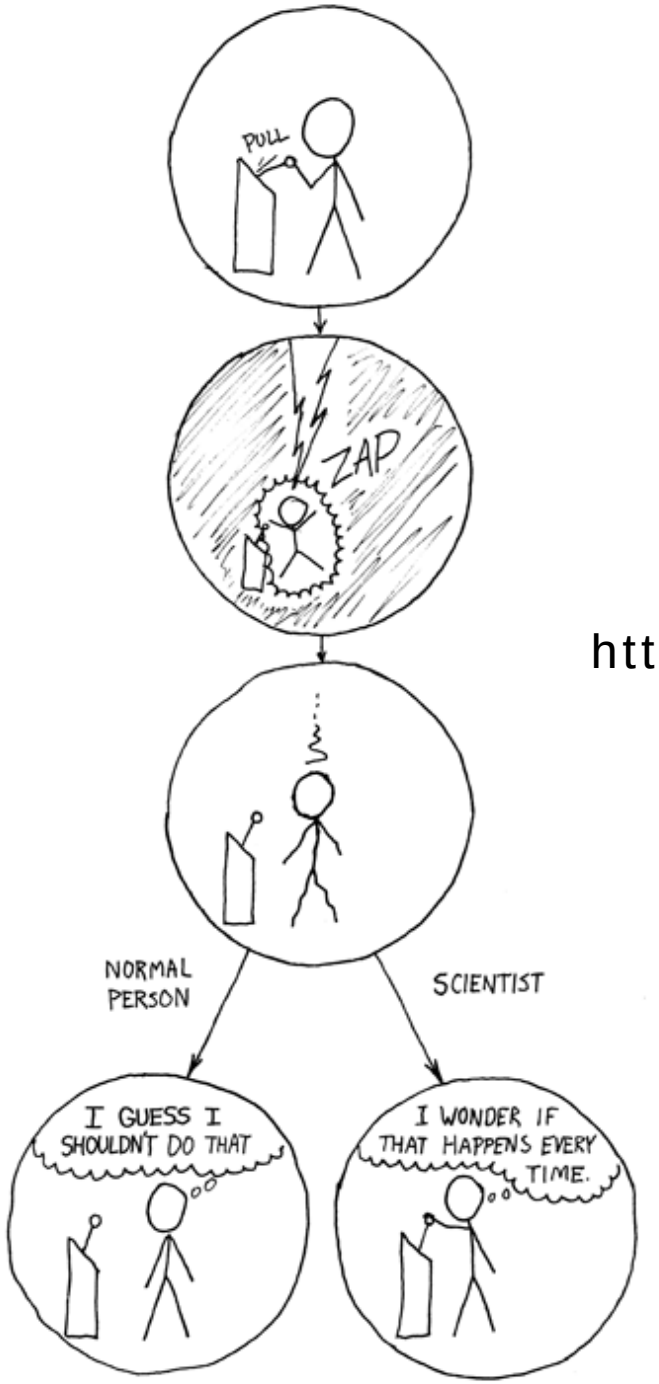
- The three basic modes of informatics are **theory, construction, and empiricism**
  - all three are essential for successful work
  - empiricism is slowly gaining ground
- There are many examples where **sound decisions** can be made on empirical basis only
  - in particular when selecting technology or methods
- The main **quality criteria** for empirical work are
  - credibility and
  - relevance
- **Scales** are often mis-used
  - Make sure you have a sufficient scale type
    - For SW quality or complexity you almost never do



http://xkcd.com/c242.html

Thank you!