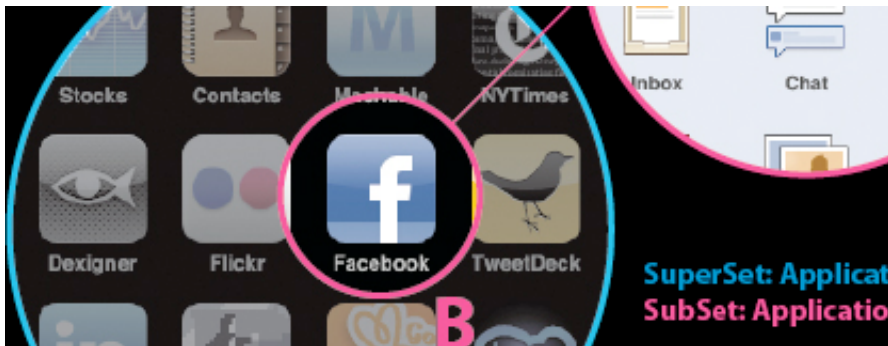# Archetypes and Their Use in Mobile UX

[Rahul Sen](#) on May 17th, 2010

Have you ever needed a user manual to sit on a good chair? Probably not. When we see a good chair, we almost always know exactly what to do, how to use it and what *not* to do with it. And yet, chairs are made by the thousands, and several challenge these base assumptions to become classics in their own right. The chair is one of the most universally recognized *archetypes* known to us. In light of recent events in the mobile realm, I believe that the stage is set to probe notions of archetypes in the mobile space.

Archetypes

> **Archetype:** An **archetype** (pronounced [/ˈɑrkɪtaɪp/](#)) is an original model of a person, ideal example, or a prototype upon which others are copied, patterned, or emulated; a symbol universally recognized by all. ([*wikipedia*](#))

[Note: There is a deep philosophical definition of [archetype as proposed by Carl Jung](#). *This article is **not** based on that form of definition.*]

The word archetype has its roots in architectural theory. It also deals with cognition at its most basic level. In a very generic way—points, lines and planes are archetypes in graphic design. Columns, walls, floors, roofs are archetypes in architecture.

When we see a flight of stairs, our cultural memory and experiences kick in. They teach us that

stairs signify climbing, doors represents portals between zones and chairs are (usually) something you sit on. We seldom think much about them. Experience makes us learn, encode and remember these archetypes, making us react spontaneously to them. The degree to which archetypes are understood varies greatly between cultures. Interestingly, archetypes can always be deconstructed, challenged or probed since they merely act as starting points of reference. There are innumerable examples of archetypes that have been reintroduced to us in the most puzzling ways in order to question our own understanding of them; for example Escher's illustration below, which turns the stair archetype on its head.

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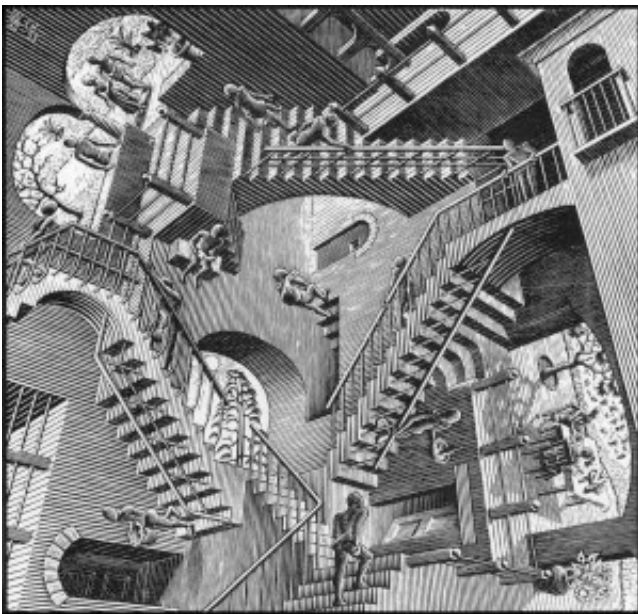
Escher deconstructs the chair archetype

Archetypes vs Metaphors

With all the press that metaphor gets in UX, it's worth pointing our how it is different from the archetype. [Metaphors](#) are analogies between two objects or ideas, conveyed by the use of one word instead of another. In interaction models, metaphors are different from archetypes in the sense that they are the conceptual transference of an idea/archetype into another more tangible form that becomes more easily understood. The archetype is the original idea/model in itself. An obvious example of metaphors in industrial design are when chairs are inspired by nature.

Tulip Chair inspired by an obvious metaphor

Further Reading on Archetypes

For more information on archetypes, the book [Form, Space and Order](#) by Francis D. Ching is a good introduction to archetypes in architecture (for lateral understanding). My [graduate research thesis in architecture](#) also dealt with archetypes, and it is this understanding that motivated me to seek and understand archetypes in interaction design.

Mobile UX Archetypes

Our ever-increasing mobile interaction with our World implies that we are creating, consuming and sharing content constantly on the go. We already have about 1 billion net-enabled cellular devices, according to the Hammersmith Group report on the [Internet of Things](#). We're checking mail, updating statuses, sharing personal data and browsing constantly using little computers in our pockets. Over time, one could expect a certain familiarity to set in with the different mannerisms and modes with which we find ourselves interacting. Can we look at a user interface and guess what it's going to do for us? If the answer is a tentative yes, it probably means its interaction model is based on a common archetype.

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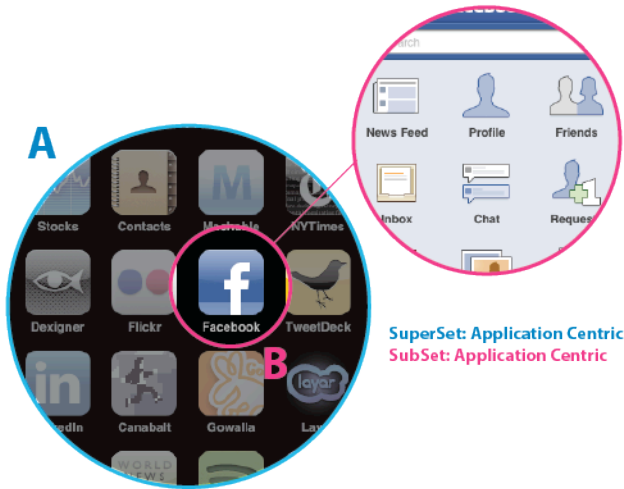
A few months ago, my experience of mobile archetypes at a macro-level appeared predictable. The iPhone and its subsequent 'cousins' seemed to be what you'd expect from a mobile operating system. Without any qualitative leanings to its effectiveness, the recent release of Microsoft's Windows Phone 7 series and Kin phones inspired me to examine the differences in mobile archetypes that I'd encountered.

In the absence of academic definitions, one could define Mobile User Experience (MUX) Archetypes to be *'prototypes' that are or might rapidly become models for future everyday mobile interaction behavior.* They are overarching experience patterns that we, the Mobile Generation, will have poked, prodded and swiped countless times during our lives. Over time, these interactions would most likely have formed cognitive roadmaps in our cultural memory, paving the way for more thought-free acts while using technology. We would expect interactions to occur in certain ways, and would be surprised and often annoyed when they would not meet our expectations. When someone reinvents an archetype (like Facebook did to email), it makes us pause, think and readjust our behavior.

My criteria for selecting these archetypes were:

1. These are archetypes on the foundations of which a part or whole mobile user experience can be conceived.
2. *Most* exist out there on mobile devices, while others seem destined to enter this space soon.
3. They are mostly screen-based interactions (for now).

The groups and examples chosen are sub-sets as well as super sets. For example, Facebook is by itself a super-set of many smaller metaphors and archetypes. These would be subsets of the Facebook family, but might have UX archetypes of their own.

News Feed Profile Friends

Inbox Chat Request

SuperSet: Application Centric
SubSet: Application Centric

Archetypes as subsets and supersets

The MUX Archetypes I propose are:

1. Application Centric
2. Activity Centric
3. Timeline Centric
4. Context (Location) Centric
5. Process/Task Centric
6. Emotion Centric
7. People/Identity Centric

1. Application Centric

In such a MUX archetype, **the applications make the interaction experience**. The OS of the software are predominantly engines that can run and manage applications or 'apps'. These 'apps' become the tools with which the device is made useful to us. App-centric OS's like the Apple iPhone/iPad platform result in the interaction being likened more to a Swiss-army knife. The 'start experience' or the archetype that one is greeted with most while using these app-centric platforms are usually some form of smorgasbord of the apps that are on the device.

iPhone

G1 Android Phone

Samsung bada

(Examples: Google Android, Samsung bada, Microsoft Surface)

2. Activity Centric

In activity-centric MUX archetypes the focus shifts to the activities that one intends to perform with the interaction. **The activities make the interaction experience.** These are usually represented visually and placed in an easily accessible sequence. The most obvious example in recent times has been the Windows Phone 7 series, which advocated a direct 'content-first' approach. It mapped the most important activities of the user on its 'start experience', with a secondary emphasis on 'apps'.

Windows Phone 7

(Examples: Windows Phone 7, Zune, the original iPod, Sony PS3)

3. Timeline Centric

Timeline centric MUX archetypes focus on **time as a material**. In these archetypes, the user is invariably manipulating, tweaking, dragging and experiencing data with time as a prime focus. The latest example is the release of the Microsoft KIN phones where the stripped user interface focuses on [timeline centric features like the Loop and the Spot](#).


MIcrosoft KIN

The Whale Hunt by Jonathan Harris

Nike+ stats

(Examples: Microsoft KIN, 'The Whale Hunt' by Jonathan Harris, Nike+ stats, Mint, EDI monitors, MIDI-channel mixers etc.)

4. Context (Location) Centric

Contextual/location centric MUX archetypes ride the wave of GPS and its interweaving with social networking. In these archetypes, the user is invariably 'checking in' (or actually checking out) places based on GPS mapping and other ways of stitching locational data together. A great example of this is the Photosynth, which takes a user's photos, mashes them together and recreates a 3D scene out of them that anyone can view and move around in. Applications like Layar use information about your location to augment the real world as seen through your mobile phone.
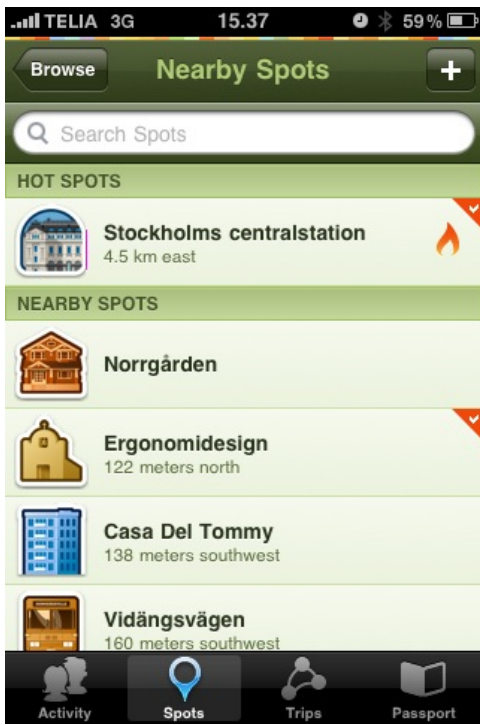
Gowalla

Photosynth

Layar

align="alignleft"
(Examples: Foursquare, Gowalla, Photosynth, Layar etc.)

5. Process/Task Centric

These MUX archetypes enable a user to achieve certain tasks by describing the process in a sequential way. These archetypes invariably carry a 'trail of breadcrumbs,' enabling the user to journey back and forth through the process while following instructions. These archetypes would usually resort to a tying element of some sort during a process of educating the user. This thread would lead the user by the hand (or eye!) through the process.


20 minute meals

Popular Science+ iPad app

(Example: Jamie Oliver's '20 minute meal' app, Tutorial section of the Popular Science+ iPad app etc.)

5. Emotion Centric

Jonathan Harris' [We Feel Fine](#) project epitomize an emotion-centric interaction archetype. Even though this model has not (to my knowledge) been implemented on a mobile platform yet, it seems loaded with potential. Jonathan Harris describes the interface to the data collected on 'We Feel Fine' as "a self-organizing particle system, where each particle represents a single feeling posted by a single individual."
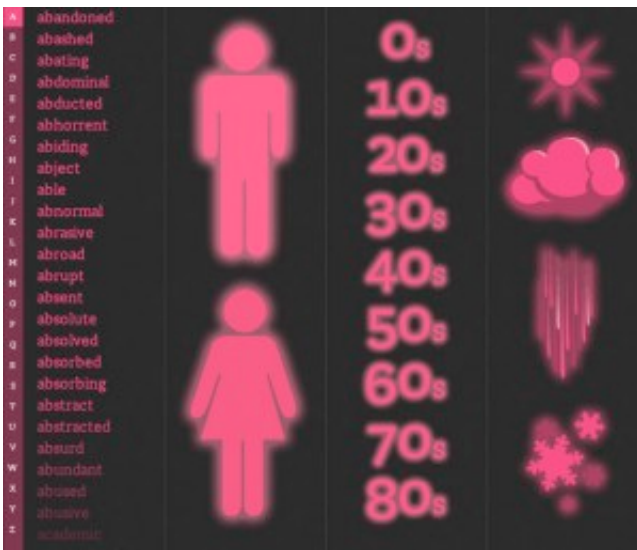
We Feel Fine

(Example: 'We Feel Fine' by Jonathan Harris etc.)

6. People/Identity Centric

This MUX-archetype is most familiar with users of any social networking platform. Your identity and the identities of the various contacts in social networks to which you belong to are the prime focus for such an archetype. They are almost invariably centered around 'status updates' of some kind, leading to a stream of news about different identities.

Vodafone 360
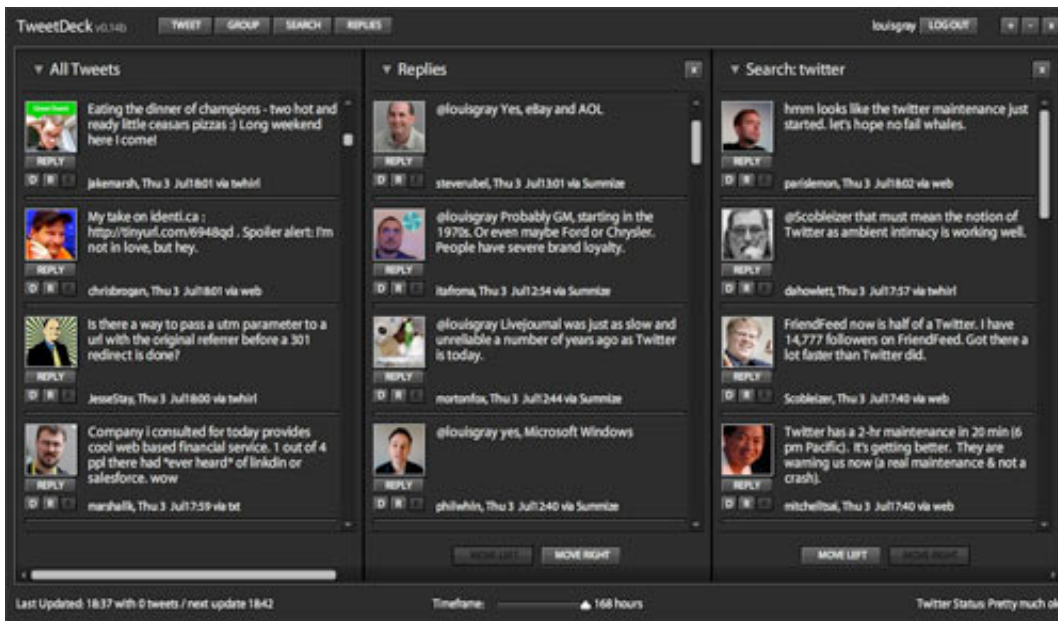
Twitter API (as used in TweetDeck)

(Examples: [Vodafone 360](#), Facebook, Twitter, Linkedin etc.)

Why do these archetypes matter?

It is not as important to debate the accuracy in grouping these archetypes as it is to imagine the possibilities of interchanging an expected archetype with another. Thinking in archetypes gives us a unique overview of interaction models and their intrinsic behavior patterns, making it possible to ask interesting *what if* questions and examine consequences. Archetypes and the overview they provide also help us critique experiential bottlenecks when they occur in designed interactions. Thinking laterally, if the form of a chair did not entice a user to sit on it, then perhaps the form or the formal archetype needed rethinking.

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Our interaction experience of a product or service can vary drastically with the chosen archetype. For example, Twitter status updates are predominantly people/identity centric. What would happen if this archetype were to be inverted to say an 'emotion-centric' Linked-In? It might yield a very different experience of how our professional networks are feeling over time.

These are early days in the field of interaction design (especially in the mobile realm). Several MUX models are hugely successful, while most fail to remain relevant. The discussion regarding mobile interaction archetypes must be an ongoing, iterative process with a hope that experience models will mature and stabilize with time and refinement.

I believe that, in the near future, complexity, diversity and an almost ubiquitous presence of mobile interactions are certain. With mature, universal archetypes our designed interactions cold become more intuitive, leaving user manuals obsolete and making experiences more joyful for everyone.

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Images:

Escher print: [Meridian](#) ; Tulip chair: [Design Heaven](#); IPhone: [GeekWhat](#); Android: [Blogoscoped](#); Samsung Bada: [Gadgetvenue](#); Windows 7: [All Touch Tablet](#); The Whale Hunt: Jonathan Harris via [Andy Polaine](#); Nike: [Electronica](#); Photosynth: [Architecture Blog](#); Layar: [Layar](#); Jamie Oliver iPhone App: [CBS Interactive](#); Popular Science: [144Apps](#); We Feel Fine: We Feel Fine via [Change the Thought](#); Vodafone 360: [Geeky Gadgets](#); Twitter: [The D'Alesio Blog](#)

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Brilliant comments

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