

## Mapping the Culture of an Online Community

### **ARCHETYPES AND THEIR ATTRIBUTES DERIVED BY ACT-KM PARTICIPANTS AT THE ACT-KM CONFERENCE 13-14 OCTOBER 2004**

*These archetypes were derived using complex facilitation techniques developed by the Cynefin Centre for Organizational Complexity ([www.cynefin.net](http://www.cynefin.net)) in the fringes of the ACT-KM conference, involving many different participants at different times (important as a means of containing individual biases).*

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#### **What Are Archetypes?**

Archetypes are implicit character or persona types, embedded within the narrative consciousness of any social group that has an identity of its own. Once we have an identity as a group, we tell stories to ourselves and to each other. All of these stories represent and express different aspects of our lived experience as a cohesive group. The collection of narratives that we share, forms a rich, contextualised resource for how we see ourselves and each other.

Our culture as a group is represented by common themes and resonances that we replay and reinforce in our narratives. The aspects of personality that come to the fore in our group stories similarly reinforce and express our common sense of identity. Archetypes are characterizations of people abstracted from real people and real experiences, but expressed at the level of the culture as a whole. Archetypes can be reached through a sample of the stories that a culture tells about itself.

Archetypes and themes can give us useful clues to ourselves. One of the peculiarities of a group culture is that as soon as we acclimatise to it, we become unconscious exponents of it. It is extremely difficult to be conscious of our culture beyond the first few days of being a newcomer. Archetype representations can be useful and powerful characterisations of our culture to ourselves, and help us address blind spots or opportunities in our culture that we might otherwise miss.

#### **Extracting the ACT-KM Archetypes**

In order to get to the implicit archetypes within ACT-KM's culture we had first to gather a collection of stories about participants' experiences on ACT-KM, positive, negative and striking. We needed to elicit stories which participants considered characteristic of their experience of the Forum. We did this by email invitation to the list in the few weeks leading up to the Canberra ACT-KM conference in mid-October. Replies were received by private email, and the anecdotes anonymised and printed out.

On the first day of the ACT-KM Conference, the printed email anecdotes were posted in the networking area of the conference for delegates to read, together with an invitation to

delegates to add their own anecdotes on sticky notes. By the end of the first day, we had some 30 anecdotes to work with.

In the morning of the first day, Shawn Callahan and I facilitated small groups of conference delegates in going through the stories and identifying key characters appearing in the stories (eg nervous newcomer, thought leader, aggressive poster). In Dave Snowden's terms, these characters are stereotypes – over-simplified versions of real people. To give us clues about the group's underlying culture, these needed to be unpicked further. Over the lunch break, with different sets of delegates, we worked through each of the stereotypical characters and had attributes assigned to each of them (eg pushy, aggressive, fuck-wit, nervous).

In a final stage during the tea break of day 2, again working with a new set of people, we gathered all of the attributes (each one written on a sticky note), took away the anecdotes and the characters, and we asked the delegates to cluster the attribute sticky notes into collections that made sense to them. One way to avoid bias from single dominant individuals here, is to make sure that people are moved around from one area of the clustering whiteboard to another. After several iterations, the clusters appeared relatively stable, and we asked the delegates to imagine these clusters were fictional personalities within the ACT-KM community, and to give them a name. These are the archetype representations listed below.

After the conference, Straits Knowledge engaged our artist to draw caricatures from the character names and attribute descriptions. The artist's brief was minimal in order to avoid bias. It should be noted that Dave Snowden recommends if possible having an artist work with participants directly at the attribute clustering and character construction phase. In this case it was not possible to have an artist present at the conference.

### **What Does This Process Mean?**

We can be sure of a few interesting things about these archetypes. First, the archetypes we extracted are based on real people's experience of the ACT-KM forum in three different ways:

- In the original anecdotes recounting the experience of ACT-KM participants
- In the character and attribute associations assigned by conference delegates who participated (also ACT-KM members, who would be leveraging their own experience in interpreting the anecdotes)
- In the construction of fictional characters by delegates (again leveraging their own experiences as an interpretive lens).

However, these personalities have been abstracted from real people and real situations, such that they can be applied more generally to many different situations. Strong archetypes will produce strong resonances with members of the community, who will recognise elements of several archetypes in themselves and their peers, but will rarely identify completely with just one. This is the key difference between an archetype and a stereotype (which is a label that can easily be assigned to a particular individual in a particular context).

## What Can Be Done With Archetypes?

The most obvious thing is shared self-awareness: we can use the archetypes to gain insights about the nature (and culture) of the group itself. In a fluid online group such as ACT-KM, such shared self-awareness is hard to come by. One intriguing observation from the balance of the archetypes presented below is that the impact of the Firestone/McElroy/Snowden debates had obviously left a deep impression on the list, apparently spilling over into a few of the archetypes that emerged. Another surprise was the sense of frustration and timidity felt by lurkers on the list, together with the presence an element of paranoia (see the Backstabber below).



Archetypes also carry implicit values belonging to the community. As such, they can be used to provide a vocabulary for talking about permissible and impermissible behaviours, without appearing to attack or praise particular individuals. Because they are so deeply rooted in the experience of the community, they can also be used in formal communications of the group – their resonance with the general experience of the group means that messages can be framed in a way that are much more likely to be understood and absorbed by members.

However, any one set of archetypes is not a universal expression of the entire identity of the group. The archetypes that emerge in any exercise are strongly conditioned by the immediate historical context of that community at that point of time, and by the people who participate in the extraction exercise (which is why we needed news sets of people at each stage). We saw, for example, how strongly the Firestone/McElroy/Snowden debates had imprinted members' awareness of the community. A culture is a dynamic, shifting thing, and an online community is much more transient than a physical one. These archetypes will not all persist, and new ones will emerge as the experience of the community changes.

The archetypes that emerge are also conditioned by the nature of the question that is asked when eliciting stories. In our case, we asked people for their positive, negative or striking experiences of being a member of the group. We might have asked for something more specific, such as participation in a particular discussion, how they were first inducted into the group, or their experience of meeting group members physically as compared with virtually. We could have focused the question onto conflicts, or we could have focused it onto collaboration. Each emphasis would have provided richer material, and more data for archetype extraction, and would probably have altered the formation of the archetypes. Dave Snowden often recommends building narrative databases to provide this kind of resource and breadth of perspective.

Using and interpreting archetypes, therefore, should be conditioned by a knowledge of the process by which they were abstracted. We hope that the archetypes given below will provide some insights into the list culture for members old and new, and afford rich discussion material. Our thanks to all of the list members who participated.

*Patrick Lambe, January 2005*

	<h3>THE MEDIATOR</h3> <p><b>Attributes:</b> Connector Keeper of the peace Takes the heat out of things Listening personality Mindful and friendly Sharing and open minded</p> <p><b>Gloss:</b> The Mediator is one of the more positive characters on ACT-KM. The Mediator is a connector, welcoming newcomers, linking people to people, has a listening personality, shares readily, and appears open minded. In disputes, the Mediator acts as keeper of the peace, often taking the heat out of things with a friendly non-confrontational approach.</p>
	<h3>THE ENERGY VAMPIRE</h3> <p><b>Attributes:</b> Asks more than they return to the group They have little to give to the community</p> <p><b>Gloss:</b> The Energy Vampire is a drain on the group, asking a lot of questions (often repetitions of common questions asked on the Forum) but contributing little to the discussions. She also has a somewhat dulling and enervating effect on the group, because the questions asked are very basic ones, and stimulate very little useful discussion, or because comments are limp-wristed and verging on the negative.</p>



## THE LURKER

### Attributes:

Lurking  
Won't take risks  
Careful of what they say  
Overly cautious

### Gloss:

This mysterious creature, designated by just one archetype, actually conceals numerous character types. It is the nature of the lurker to be unseen, and it is the nature of ACT-KM to have a very high proportion of lurkers (in the first half of 2004, 80% of the members never contributed, and only 13% posted more than once). This simple archetype masks a good deal of probable diversity. In a November 2004 posting, Shawn Callahan asked how one member felt about the low participation rate, and stimulated a flood of postings from lurkers expressing differing views on lurker types.

- Wanting to consume, not share
- Not able to communicate effectively
- Still learning, not knowledgeable enough to post
- Shy of asking questions, unfair on experts
- Fear of looking foolish
- Intimidated by an audience of 1000
- Fear of being torn to shreds
- Nothing of value to add
- Some enjoy posting, some enjoy reading
- Posted before and was ignored
- Need employer approval to post
- Will contribute when the time is right
- Views need to be well thought out and articulated, lack of time
- Prefer one to one contacts to public posts
- List discussions not sufficiently interesting or relevant
- Not wanting to clog other people's inboxes
- Nothing to disagree with or challenge



## THE ANGRY LITTLE MAN

### Attributes:

Insane remarks  
Persistent, follows things through, worries at things, won't let go  
Passionate, committed, and evangelical, but totalitarian  
Very limited, rigid perspectives, completely flattens the discussion  
Impatient and over-critical  
Judges what you say, talks down to you in a very patronising way  
Aggressive, makes heated remarks, acts like a bully  
Doesn't listen  
Acts pissed off most of the time

### Gloss:

This character is a clear legacy of the Firestone/McElroy/Snowden debates that spanned almost 6 months from November 2003 to April 2004, before the community, exhausted by conflict, pressured the moderators to suspend the posting rights of the more aggressive and persistent posters to those debates. Confrontation, bad temperedness, very limited perspectives, and a sense of superiority are hallmarks of this character.






## THE BEGINNER

### Attributes:



Learning  
Innocent  
Naï ve


### Gloss:


The Beginner archetype was exemplified in a number of new discussion threads started by newcomers in the final quarter of 2004. The Beginner is differentiated from the Energy Vampire in that while they tend to ask very basic questions that have been asked many times before, their open approach elicits welcoming responses and generous sharing. Often the discussion threads evolve from being simple responses, into more detailed discussions about the issues behind the question between the core group members. Beginners may also be unwitting foils for the more sinister archetypes. During the McElroy/Firestone controversies, innocent questions from a newcomer about KM strategy and standards (favoured topics in the Firestone/McElroy canon) could reignite an argument that had almost expired, and plunge the list back into bad tempered and abstract argument, much to the consternation of the unwitting Beginner.

	<p><b>THE HOSTAGE</b></p> <p><b>Attributes:</b> Has unmet expectations Feels frustrated Feels gagged, nobody listens</p> <p><b>Gloss:</b> This is an unusual character to emerge from a discussion forum that is voluntary, but it expresses a number of experiences recounted by members about feeling inhibited from participating because of the sense of high status projected by core group members, because of lack of feedback that indicates their posts are taken seriously, and because of a sense of powerlessness to influence the agenda of the community despite an active interest in doing so.</p>
	<p><b>THE BACKSTABBER</b></p> <p><b>Attributes:</b> Spider-like, secretive and reserved Works behind the scenes Opportunistic</p> <p><b>Gloss:</b> One of the more intriguing characters to emerge from the exercise, the Backstabber illustrates some of the paranoid tendencies arising from an online medium that is poor in providing social feedback. It is easy to build an impression of a powerful coterie behind the scenes, especially since many participants are aware of private communications taking place beyond the public forum, particularly those between core members of the ACT-KM community. The Backstabber is a stealthy, malicious character, who works to his own advantage by leveraging the private communication opportunities in the group, while maintaining a low or innocuous profile in the public discussion forum.</p>



	<p><b>THE PROFESSOR</b></p> <p><b>Attributes:</b> Analytical and authoritative Provides an intellectual compass to the group Thoughtful but wordy, abstract and theoretical Complex expressions Knowledgeable and questioning</p> <p><b>Gloss:</b> This archetype is a nod to the academic members of the Forum, and is on balance a positive character, despite the Forum's occasional lapses into criticism of overly theoretical and non-practitioner oriented posts. It suggests that on balance the academic perspective is recognised as an important dimension of the list, so long as it does not become too far distant from practice.</p>
	<p><b>THE SOPHIST</b></p> <p><b>Attributes:</b> Wordy and questioning Pedantic and nit-picking, likes polemics and arguments Arrogant – “My view is best” Has a soapbox mentality A long-winded wannabe guru Unfocused fuck-wit</p> <p><b>Gloss:</b> Online discussion forums are fertile grounds for display. Our normal social moderation mechanisms (whether the audience looks interested or bored, is paying attention or not) are not visible, and those who like to show off have every incentive and very little disincentive to do so. The Sophist is characterised by self-referential postings, a liking for taking issue with other people and presenting their own pet perspective, and an evident aspiration to be taken as an authority.</p>

	<p>The ACT-KM Forum has come out of the Firestone/McElroy/Snowden debates with markedly lower tolerance levels for the Sophist, so the argumentative strand of this character's behaviour is somewhat mitigated at present. The tendency to show off still exists, however!</p>
	<p><b>THE VISIONARY</b></p> <p><b>Attributes:</b> Adventurous, has broad interests Sees the big picture Satisfied with the community dynamics Astonishes and surprises with inspired contributions</p> <p><b>Gloss:</b> Another of the key positive figures within the culture of ACT-KM, the Visionary is an important player and shaper of views. He is a versatile character, having contributions to make in a number of areas, and when debates get too granular, will pull attention back to the larger context. One of the main reasons why the Visionary is appreciated is for his capacity to present insights in fresh and distinctive ways.</p>

	<p><b>THE GURU</b></p> <p><b>Attributes:</b> Has a high reputation Powerful</p> <p><b>Gloss:</b> It is interesting that the Guru figure is distinguished from the archetype of the Professor. The Guru in ACT-KM is not necessarily an academic, but is clearly a thought leader and highly respected. The attribute ‘powerful’ masks a sense in which the Guru also inspires fear and a degree of intimidation. Lurkers, as we saw, often fear that they will appear foolish and might be criticised, and this must often be by comparison with the pronouncements of the Guru, however benign their manner might be. The Guru, generally speaking, does not post prolifically, and tends to be brief but profound.</p>
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### Concluding Remarks

The public face of ACT-KM is of a positive, immensely supportive, and diverse community. It welcomes newcomers, provides endless support to beginners in KM as well as delving into deeper Km practice and theory issues. It has weathered a number of aggressive debates, and always seems to have navigated its way through with a very light moderator touch.

The archetypes extraction exercise reminds us that every online community has its invisible sides, represented in the back channel communications that go on between members, the face to face contacts among the core group, and the private feelings and reactions of members when they engage with the community either passively or actively. If for nothing else, this exercise is useful to remind us of this invisible dimension, and all of its implications about how to become more hospitable, more welcoming, more useful, and less intimidating.

*Patrick Lambe January 2005*