Systems: Lesson 5

System Archetypes

# Introduction

A critical assumption in system thinking is that within the world of systems there are organizational and behavioral patterns that repeat again and again. The power of these patterns is that once the lessons they contain are understood at the general level, these learnings can be applied to any specific instance of the pattern. This in turn results in more efficient and effective resolutions to the problems that systems have.

The key to making this work, of course, is being able to recognize those general pattern within the swirl of instance specific detail. In this lesson you will practice this skill by working with the 8 archetypes described by Peter Senge in his seminal work, The Fifth Discipline.

# Objective

Your objective in this lesson is to find examples of standard system archetypes in the events going on in the world right now. You will do this by scanning the headlines of your favorite online news source looking for stories that interest you. You will then analyze these stories to understand the conflict, and the players, so that you can compare them to the patterns described in the standard system archetypes.

# Discussion

The archetype as a concept is found in many fields of enquiry from literature to philosophy to psychology. The power of the concept is always the same: as a description of a general, reasonably understood pattern that can be used to help understand specific instances.

Therefore, while the specific aim of this lesson is become comfortable with the system archetypes identified by Peter Senge, there is a more general aim as well. This is to become comfortable with the idea that patterns exist within systems, that is, that even systems with entirely different purposes may share very similar structures and behaviors. Archetypes are one way to find the repeating patterns we will uncover in our exploration of systems and user experience design, but by no means the only one. We will also find shared patterns in terms of conceptual models, workflows, interface designs and human behavior. However, for each of these things, the fundamental utility comes back to the idea that, just as with an archetype, seeing a connection between the general and the specific gives us a more efficient way to understand the specific.

# Submission

You will create a submission consisting of 4 slides: a title slide and 3 content slides, each of which takes some current event and explains how it is an example of one of the 8 system archetypes we have studied.

Each slide must contain this information:

1. The archetype it illustrates as a title
2. a very brief summary of the event, and a url reference to it
3. diagram showing the relationship between the elements in the archetype and the specifics in the story

For example, if the archetype you believe fits a particular story is Drifting Goals, then you need to be able to show a connection between the elements in the news story and the components of that archetype: a goal, an actual condition, a gap, and possibly a corrective action.

Each of your content slides must illustrate a different archetype.

In addition to the electronic submission, you will bring in a printed version of your slides that you post on the wall a part of a group critique on the due date for this lesson.

# Learning Goals

* develop an awareness of the structure of standard system archetypes
* consider the concept of patterns as an analytical tool
* practice mapping from specific situations to general representations

# Grading Rubric

| **Quality** | **Pass (1)** | **Fail (0)** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Completeness | Contains all the required elements | Does not contain all the required elements |
| Presentation | Layout, organization and graphic design of the information is appropriate and contributes to an ease of consumption of the information | Information is poorly organized, the graphic design is unattractive or inappropriate and the information contained is difficult to parse. |
| Content | There is a close and believable alignment between each of the found examples and the proposed archetype and all of the connections are clearly delineated. | The archetypes and the examples don’t align well, or there is not enough effort put into linking components of the example and the archetype |