

# THE CHARACTERISTICS\* OF USER EXPERIENCE

\*char-ac-ter-is-tic: adj. A feature that helps to distinguish a person or thing; distinctive

In his closing plenary at the 2009 IA Summit, Jesse James Garrett challenged the attendees to develop a language of critique for user experience.

“Useful, Usable and Desirable” have long been touted as the signs of a “good” user experience, however, they’re too abstract to form a meaningful language.

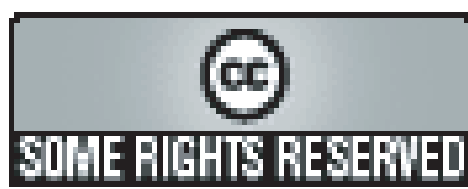
This diagram defines a set of **characteristics** that describe the building blocks of an experience - its DNA.

The extent to which an experience chooses to leverage each of these characteristics is entirely dependent on the user needs & emotions and business goals being satisfied and any physical or technological constraints.

Join the discussion at [charux.com](http://charux.com)

Richard Dalton  
[richard@mauvyrusset.com](mailto:richard@mauvyrusset.com)  
[mauvyrusset.com](http://mauvyrusset.com)  
[@mauvyrusset](http://@mauvyrusset)

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 License.



Eudora provides a **fixed** experience. Downloading e-mail to the client machine means e-mail is only available there through a desktop application.

Most sites on the web are **static** and non-adaptive, even those that offer personalized content like Facebook, Myspace and YouTube.

CNN.com is a **fixed** experience. The contents and layout cannot be changed by the user (the single exception is the U.S. vs Int'l edition)

Basecamp provides a mostly **stand-alone** experience. Only recently has it started to connect to other products.

A research experience like Wikipedia is mostly controlled by the **provider**. The controls available to the user are limited to changing language, contacting, etc.

Basecamp tries to be the “*best product possible with the least number of features*”. Its **narrow** scope intentionally does “*less than the competition*”.

Edmunds.com strives to be **unbiased** in its reviews of cars and related products and services.

Google chooses to be very **brief** in their search results. Only a page title, brief sentence and URL are shown.

flickr’s organizer tool is optimized for repeated, expert, use by **self-directed** users.

Wikipedia entries are **generic**. They are identical to all users and show no personal data.

The New York Times is a very **serious** experience with very limited use of gaming principles or techniques.

Games like World of Warcraft or online scavenger hunts intentionally challenge players with **surprising** features, locations & events.

E-mail provides a **delayed** response, as do many e-commerce experiences. Some, however, have started to provide **immediate** download of content (PDF books or games).

Google search is **one-dimensional**, focusing exclusively on the visual sense. They do have a ‘tabs’ tool for audio searches (Gaudi).

Performing a search on Google is an **individual** experience. No capabilities are provided to interact with other users.

FIXED

ACCESSIBLE

PORTABLE

To what degree is the experience local (close) to the user?

STATIC

ADAPTIVE

DYNAMIC

To what degree does the experience adapt itself for time, context or users?

FIXED

CONFIGURABLE

CHANGEABLE

To what degree is the experience customizable by a user?

STAND-ALONE

CONNECTED

INTEGRATED

To what degree does the experience stand-alone or connect to others?

PROVIDER

CONTROLLABLE

USER

Who controls the interactions with the system, the provider or the user?

NARROW

FOCUSED

BROAD

Is the experience narrowly focused on a few things, or broadly on many?

UNBIASED

IMPARTIAL

INFLUENTIAL

To what degree does the experience seek to influence the user?

BRIEF

INFORMATIONAL

THOROUGH

What amount of information does the experience provide?

SELF DIRECTED

LEARNABLE

HELPFUL

To what degree does the experience help inexperienced users?

GENERIC

PERSONAL

SPECIFIC

To what degree does the experience provide data specific to a single user?

SERIOUS

PLAYFUL

FUN

To what degree does the experience encourage play?

SURPRISING

PREDICTABLE

EXPECTED

To what degree does the experience show or hide objects, events or locations?

DELAYED

RESPONSIVENESS

IMMEDIATE

How long does the experience take to satisfy a user need?

ONE-DIMMENSIONAL

SENSORY

IMMERSIVE

To what degree does the experience engage all five senses?

INDIVIDUAL

SOCIAL

GROUP

To what degree does the experience support interaction between users?

GMail provides **portable** access to e-mail from any computer (since its a hosted solution) and in many forms (web app, portlets, mobile apps, desktop apps).

There are very few examples of highly adaptive, **dynamic** online experiences. Stephen Anderson, however, talks about it extensively, <http://is.gd/1FwiG>

BBC.com allows the user to **change** the contents and layout of the experience to suit their needs and preferences.

Google maps is more than “just a map”. It seamlessly **integrates** user generated maps, photos, reviews, and local information.

Amazon gives **users** many options and controls over the experience. Searching vs Browsing, sorting lists, zooming images, reading reviews, etc.

Microsoft Project’s robust approach to project management includes a **broad** range of almost every PM feature in existence.

E-commerce experiences like fordvehicles.com seek to **influence** their users in a certain direction (buying the product!)

Wikipedia chooses to be very **thorough** with their entries. Their mission, after all, is to be encyclopedic.

TurboTax is optimized for infrequent use. It is designed to offer more assistance than an in-store one simply because users are not familiar with the process or terminology.

GMail’s “content” is personal and **specific** to each user - their e-mail, contact lists, etc.

Facebook engages users with many **fun** games, quizzes and activities.

E-commerce experiences like Amazon rely on their ability to provide **expected** information and actions to users.

**Immediate** feedback is provided by instant messaging tools like AOL’s AIM along with newer tools like Google WAVE.

The nature of the web makes it difficult to engage all five senses. Video or gaming sites are perhaps the closest to an **immersive** web experience.

A social networking experience like Facebook is full of capabilities to allow users to communicate with each other through **groups**.

## GROCERY SHOPPING EXAMPLE on-line vs. in-store

The interface for an on-line grocery shopping experience is accessible from the comfort of your own home, or anywhere if accessed through a mobile device - and of course the groceries come to you in the form of home delivery. Contrast this with an in-store experience where a user typically drives several miles to a store.

Neither the on-line or in-store grocery shopping experience are particularly adaptive, although they do both carry different products at certain times of the year (e.g. holiday seasons).

An experience is certainly more user-configurable on-line than in-store. Preferences like language, number of search results, even screen layout - all configured easily on-line - may be almost impossible to configure in-store.

An in-store experience is a fairly stand-alone one, a user goes to the store, does their shopping and leaves. An on-line experience has at least two integrated parts - ordering online and the delivery a few days later.

Both on-line and in-store experiences are controlled by the user. The user can search or browse the on-line experience and is not forced to navigate the in-store experience in a specific order (unlike Ikea!).

Neither experience is particularly focused, both offer thousands of products. However an in-store experience may be limited in product range by the physical space constraints of the building and by lack of local demand for rare items. An on-line experience may carry more products but may be limited by what can be shipped.

Neither experience is impartial - they both trying to persuade the user to buy as many products from their company as possible. The in-store experience probably has the edge in terms of techniques to do this, however, with things like in-store sampling stations and pumping the smell of fresh bread through the building amongst the commonly used.

An on-line experience typically provides more information than an in-store one since it is much easier to deliver (and keep up to date) a large amount of product information (nutritional info, reviews, etc) on-line.

Both experiences focus on frequent, repeat use by expert users rather than learnability. An on-line experience may provide more assistance than an in-store one simply because users are not familiar with using an on-line channel for shopping for groceries and an in-store experience is so culturally familiar.

Both experiences can be slightly personal but in different ways and over different time periods. An on-line experience may remember the products bought by the user week after week and remind the user if they forget something. The staff of an in-store experience may get to know the user after a few months and chat with them.

Both experiences leverage coupons and loyalty point systems, however, the on-line experience could do more. Because it knows exactly what has been placed in the shopping cart it could give aggregate information about the products so far (how eco-friendly they are, how locally produced, etc) with targets that the user could aim for.

Since grocery shopping is a fairly routine task both experiences try to stay out of the user’s way by being as predictable as possible.

This characteristic is a major differentiator between the experiences, the in-store experience provides immediate gratification - the user can take their groceries home with them! The on-line experience doesn’t react as quickly - the user is forced to wait a few days for a delivery.

An on-line experience is limited to the senses of sight and sound. An in-store experience typically leverages the additional senses of smell (the smell of fresh bread being pumped throughout the store), touch (squeezing fruit & vegetables) and taste (occasionally stores set-up sampling stations for new products).

People generally shop for groceries close to home, so running into friends is not unusual - some stores even have coffee shops in them to support conversation. Social interaction is therefor quite high for the in-store experience - not something usually seen in an on-line experience where product reviews are typically the only interaction between customers.