week
02

Activity Theory and HCI

Implications for user interfaces

Lecture Outline

- Historical development of HCI (from Dourish)
- Activity theory in a nutshell (from Kaptelinin & Nardi)
- Activity theory and design implications for HCI

Historical Development of User Interfaces
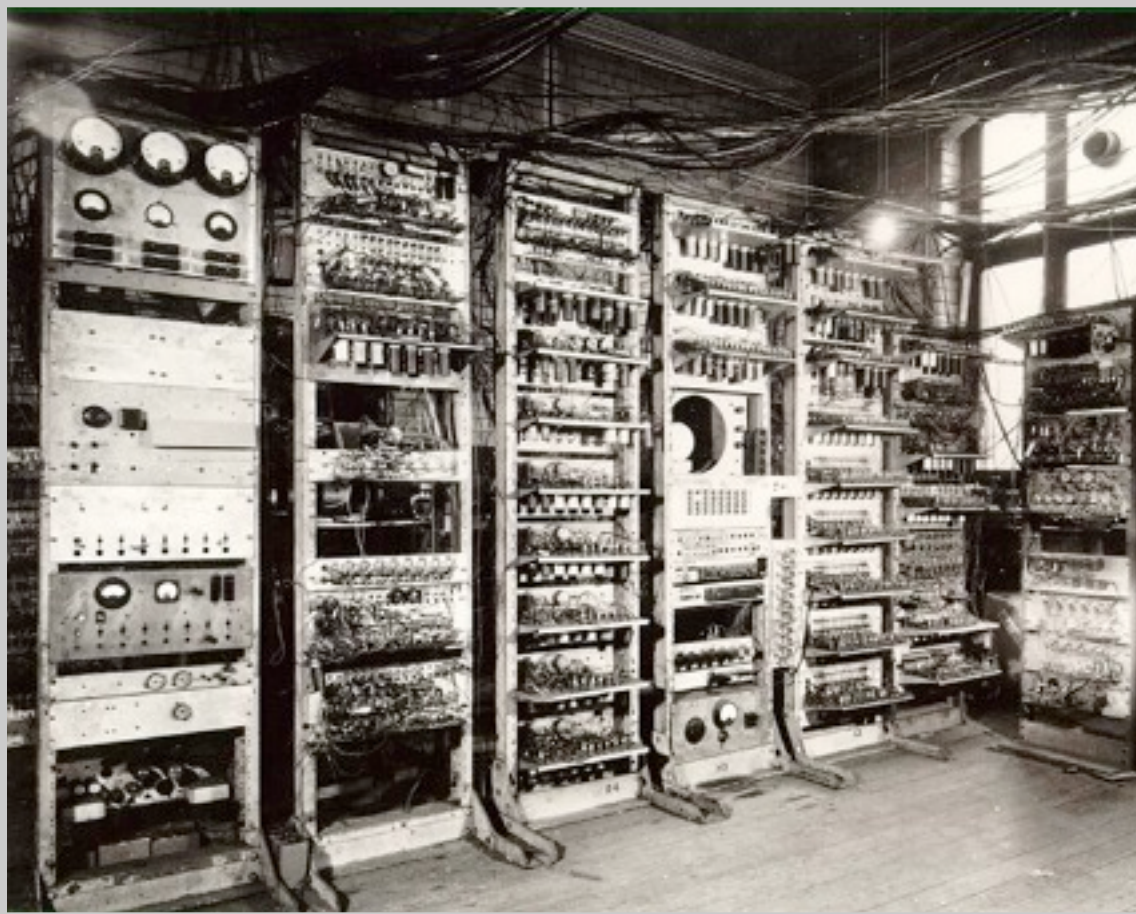
From electrical to embodied interactions

"Our experience using computers reflects a tradeoff made more than 50 years ago. We are now in a position to reconsider the trade-off."
From *Where the Action Is* (Dourish, 2001)

Historical Development of UI

| Electrical | Symbolic | Textual | Graphical | Embodied |
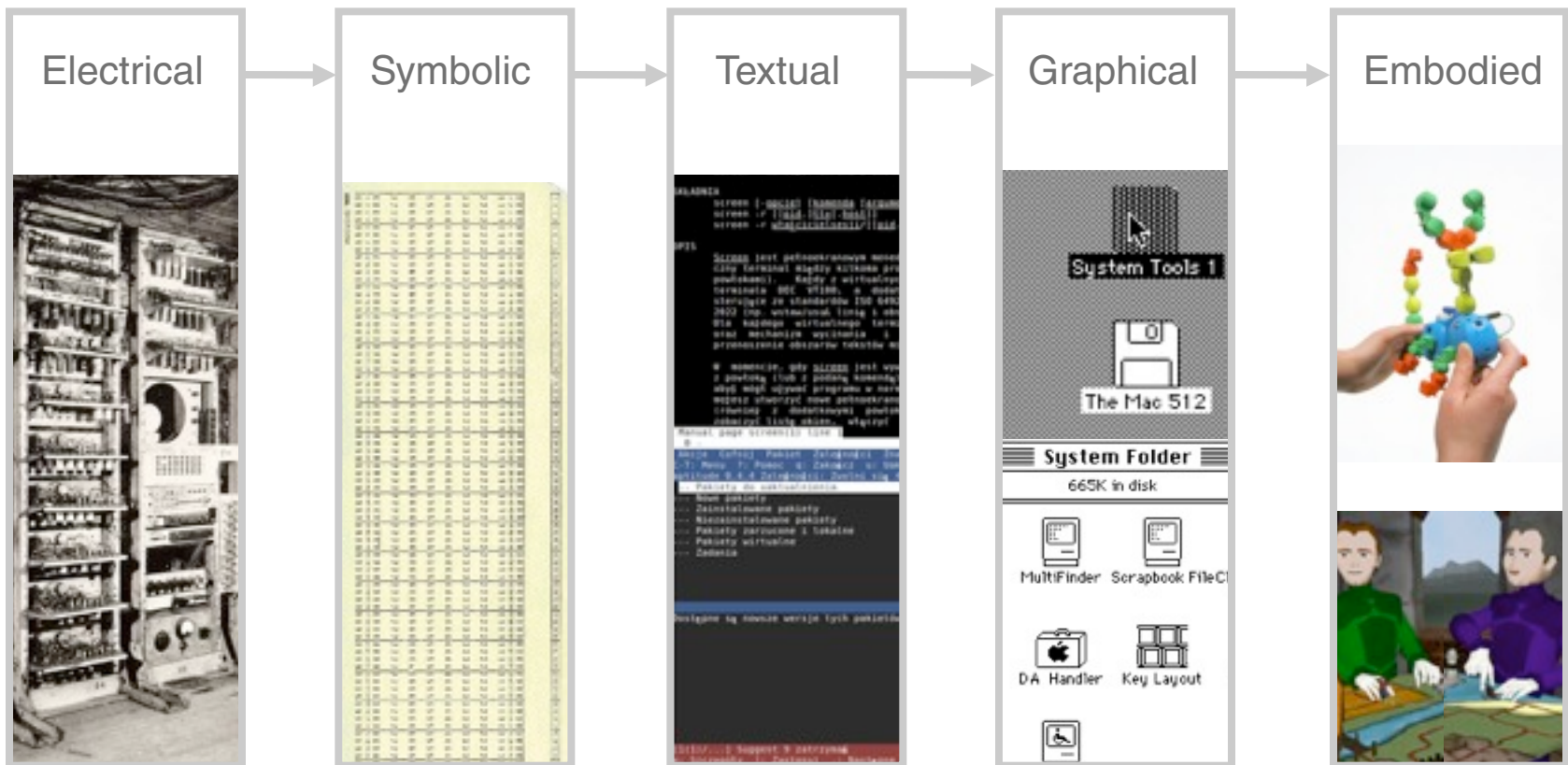
Historical Development of HCI
Electrical

- Special purpose devices (e.g., automatic calculation of missile trajectories, patterns in coded messages)

- Held a sequence of instructions in its memory.

- To program the machine for different tasks, electrical circuits need to be changed

- Interacting with the system required a thorough understanding of the electronic design

The Small Scale Experimental Machine, AKA "Baby" built at Manchester University in 1948.

Historical Development of HCI
Symbolic

- Introduction of programming systems (e.g.,assemblers)
- Symbolic forms of interaction is not textual (e.g., punched cards)
- More regularized instructions available across a wider range of machines

IBM 29 card punch (circa 1950's)

Historical Development of HCI
Textual

- Takes advantage of the best-developed form of symbolic interaction: written language
- More like a "dialog"

E.g., early UNIX, DOS

Historical Development of HCI

Graphical

Macintosh System 4.2, 1987
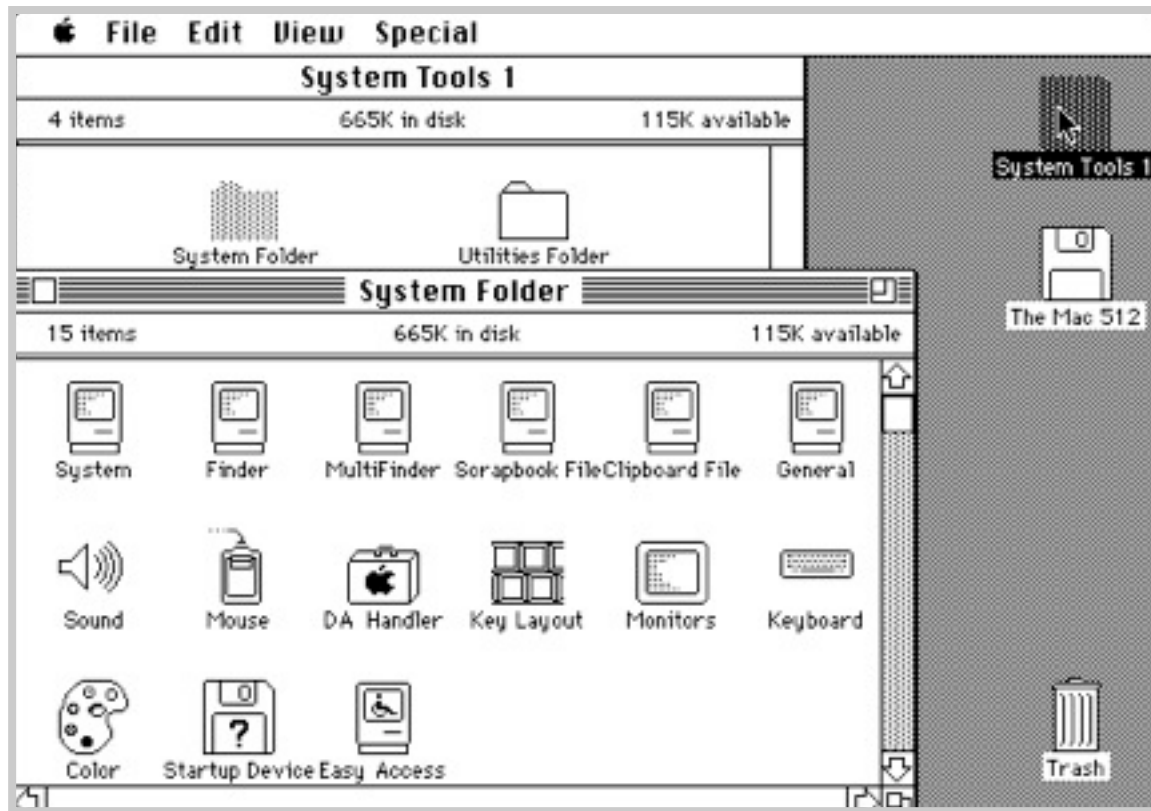
Turning interaction into two-dimensional space rather than a one-dimensional stream of characters

Historical Development of HCI

Graphical
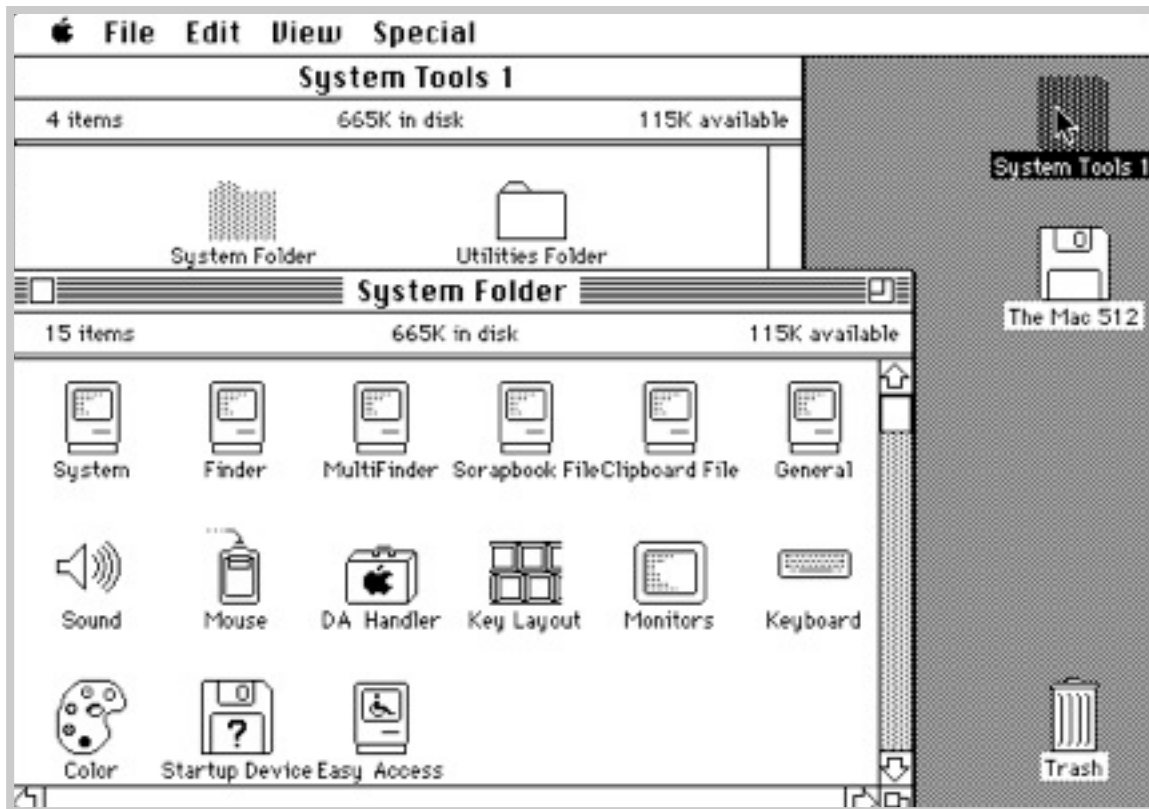
Macintosh System 4.2, 1987

- **Peripheral Attention**
  Primary space, secondary space (e.g., windows and dashboards)

- **Pattern recognition and spatial reasoning**
  Opportunities to arrange data spatially

- **Information density**
  A picture really can be worth a thousand words (e.g., diagrams)

- **Visual metaphors**
  File cabinets, trashcans, desktop tools

Embodied Interaction

Electrical	Symbolic	Textual	Graphical	Embodied
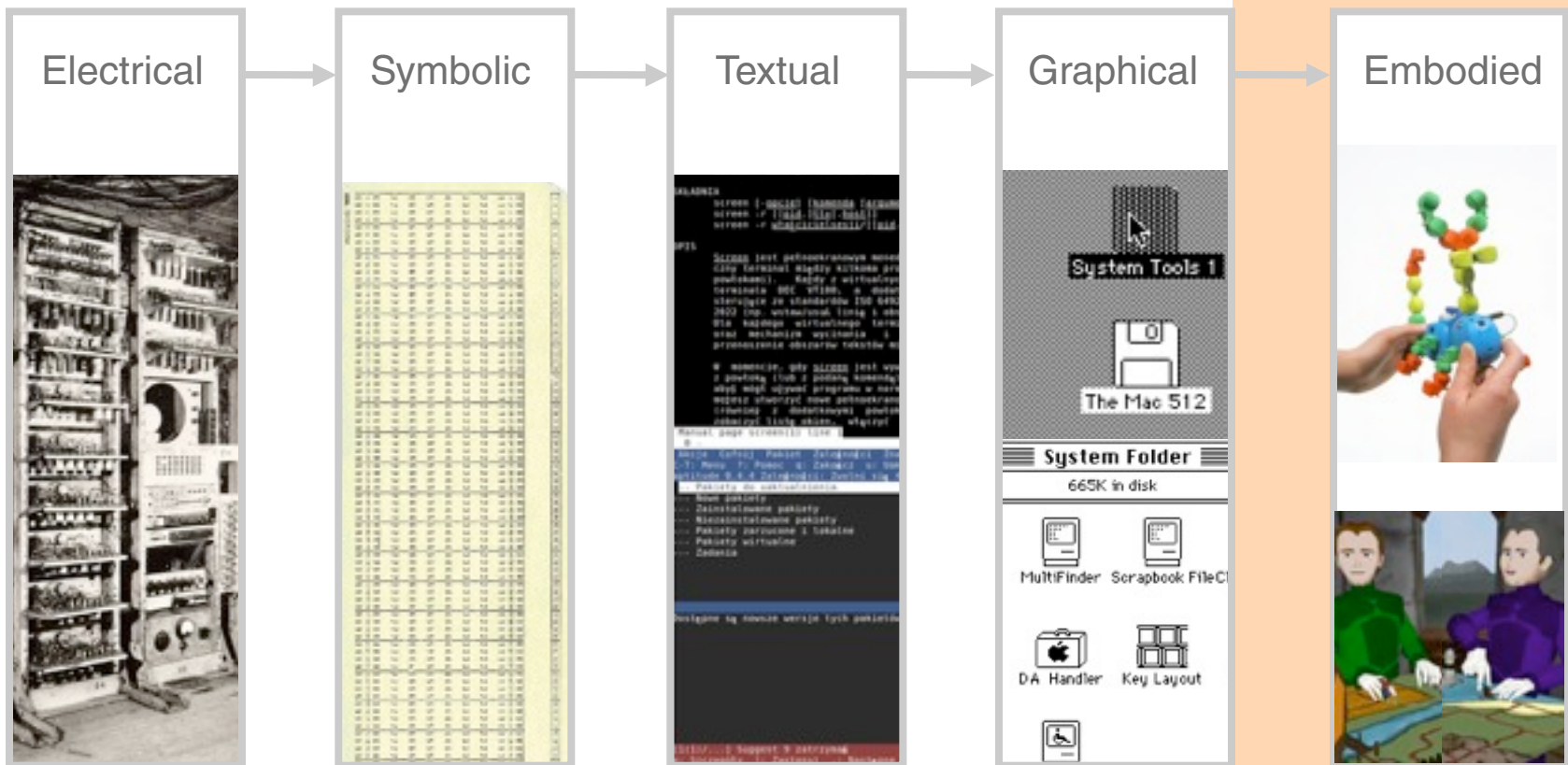
Historical Development of HCI

Tangible Interaction
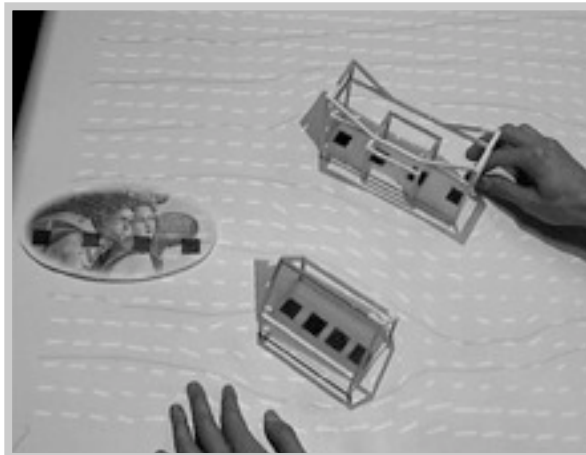
- Computation that moves beyond desktop
- Interaction is incorporated more richly in our daily experience of the physical world

- Trend 1: Distribute computation across a variety of devices
- Trend 2: Augment the everyday world with computational power

Historical Development of HCI
Social Computing
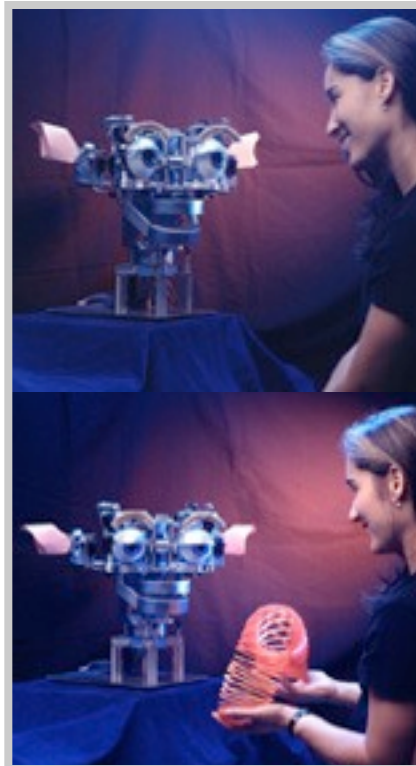
Kismet (Breaseal, 2000)

Spark (Vilhjálmsson, 2004)

- The application of sociological understanding to the design of interactive systems

Embodied Interaction

| Electrical | → | Symbolic | → | Textual | → | Graphical | → | Embodied |
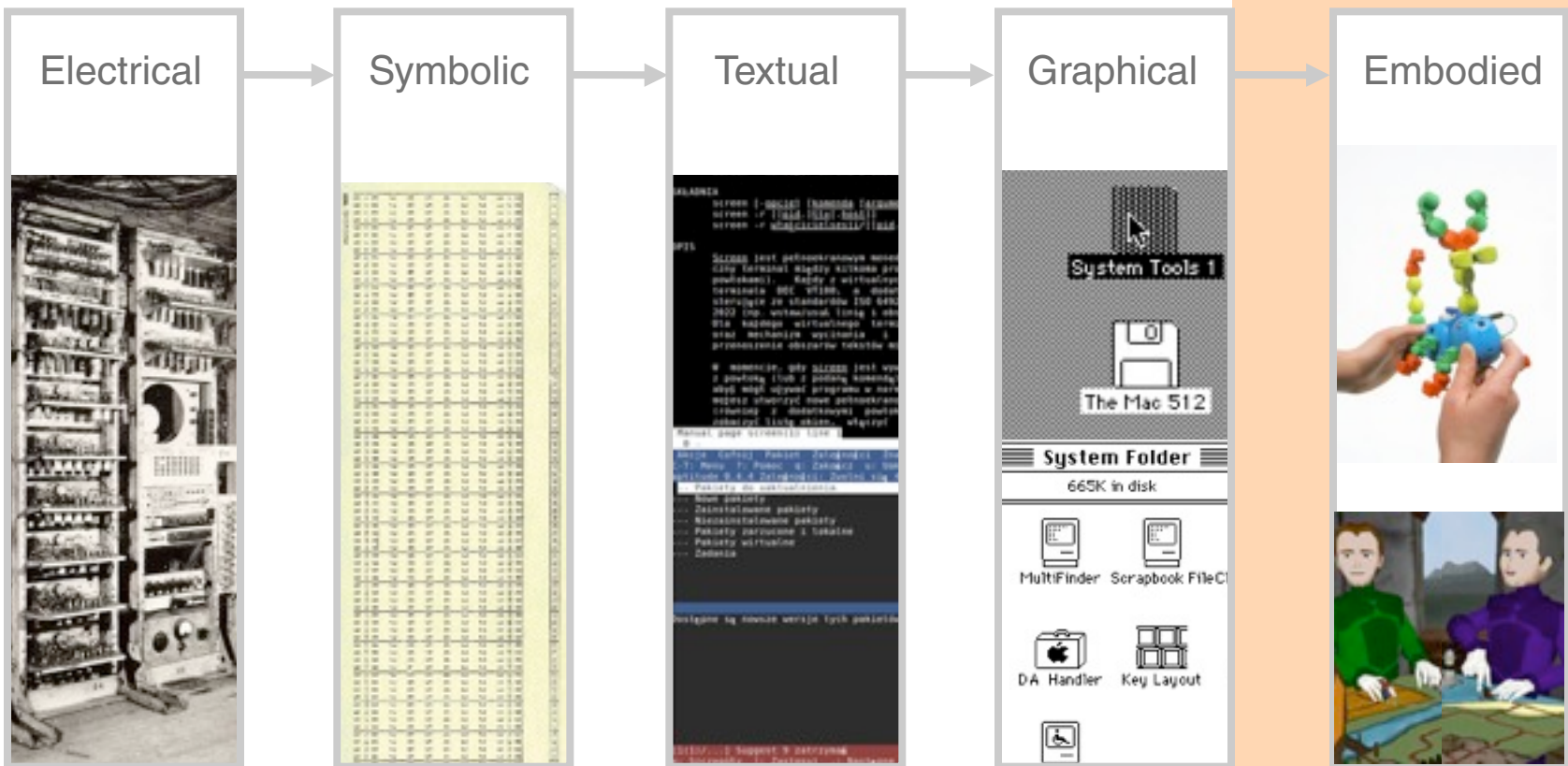
"Computer reaching out"

Interaction moves from being directly focused on the physical machine to incorporating more and more of the **user's world** and the **social setting** in which the user is embedded. The scope of human-computer interaction is expanding to include larger-scale, longer-term phenomena of computer use. (Dourish, 2004)

Activity Theory and HCI

From human factors to human actors

Attempts to incorporate human activity in interaction design have led to ideas of "activity-based," "activity-centered," or "activity-centric" computing. How people actually use technology at work and play.

Activity Theory

Aims to understand individual human beings, as well as the social entities they compose, in their natural everyday life circumstances, through an analysis of the genesis, structure, and processes of their activities.

Activity Theory
Brief Background

A → [ ] → B

Behaviorist (circa 1930's)
Observable behaviors

Activity Theory
Brief Background

Behaviorist (circa 1930's)
Observable behaviors
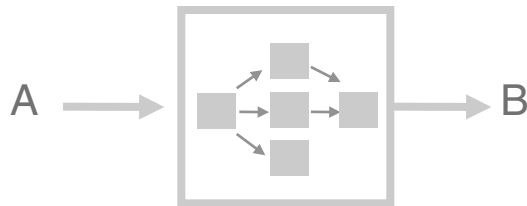
Cognitivist (circa 1950's – 1990's)
Mental models

Activity Theory

Brief Background

A → B

Behaviorist (circa 1930's)
Observable behaviors

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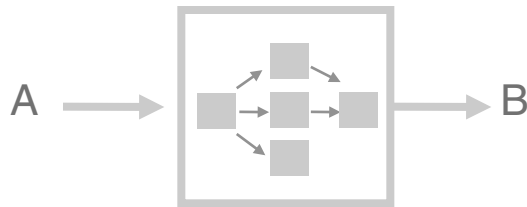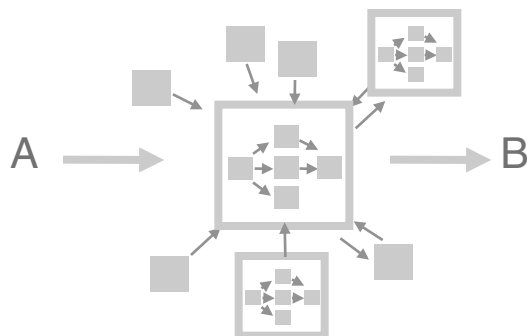
Social Constructivist (circa 1950's – 1990's)
Activities and context

Activity Theory
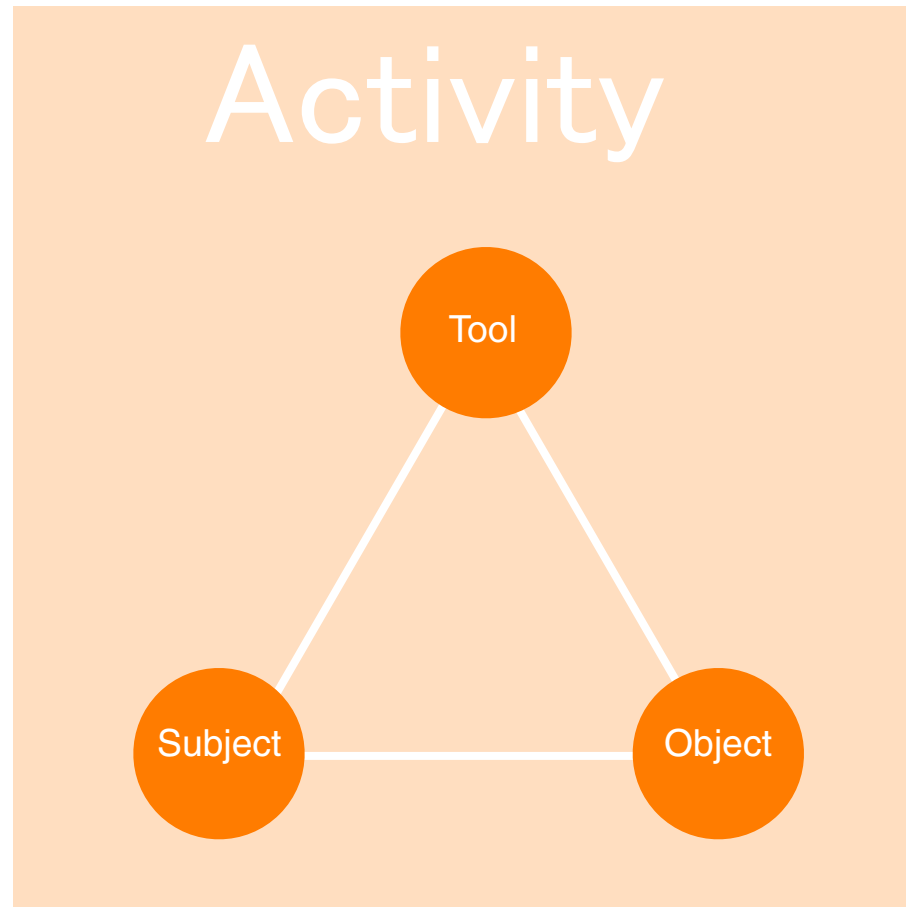
Unit of Analysis

Activity Theory

Unit of Analysis

People act as **subjects** in the world, constructing and instantiating their intentions and desires as **objects**.

Activity Theory
Unit of Analysis

People act as **subjects** in the world, constructing and instantiating their intentions and desires as **objects**.

people

Subject

Tool

Object

Activity Theory

Unit of Analysis

People act as **subjects** in the world, constructing and instantiating their intentions and desires as **objects**.

Tool

people   Subject   Object   Intentions, desires, prospective outcomes that motivate and direct activity
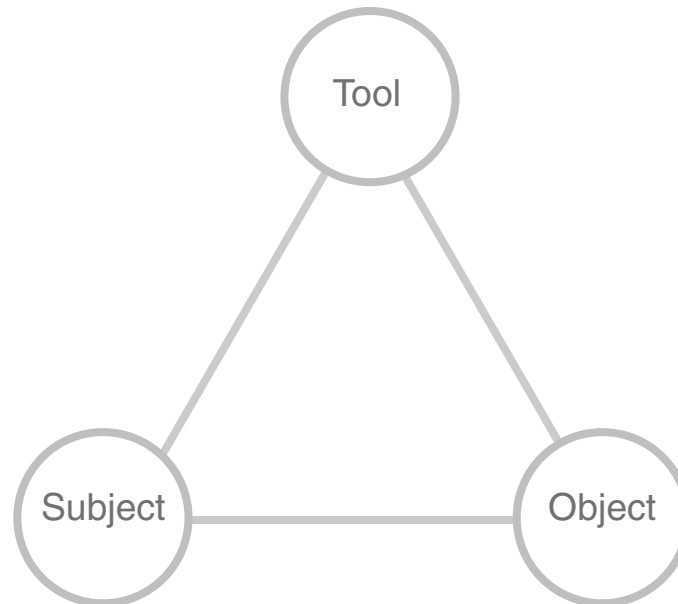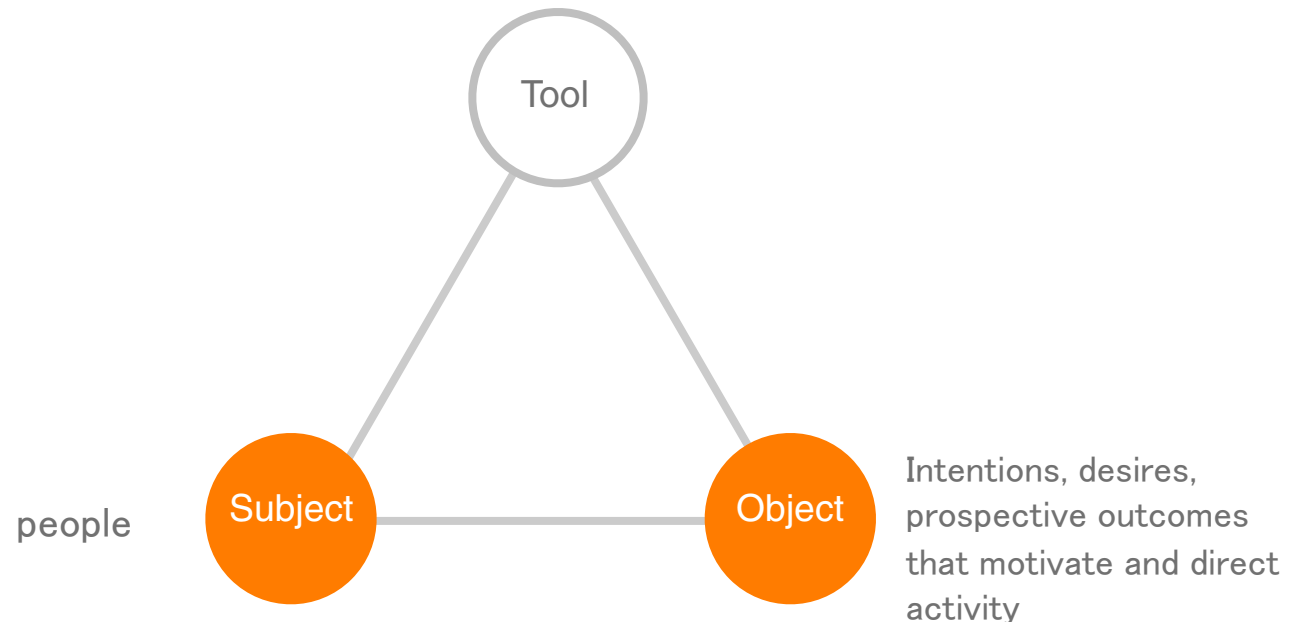
Activity Theory

Unit of Analysis

Tools mediate between people and the world. Activity theory casts the relationship between people and tools as one of **mediation**.

Tool

Subject

Object

people

Intentions, desires, prospective outcomes that motivate and direct activity
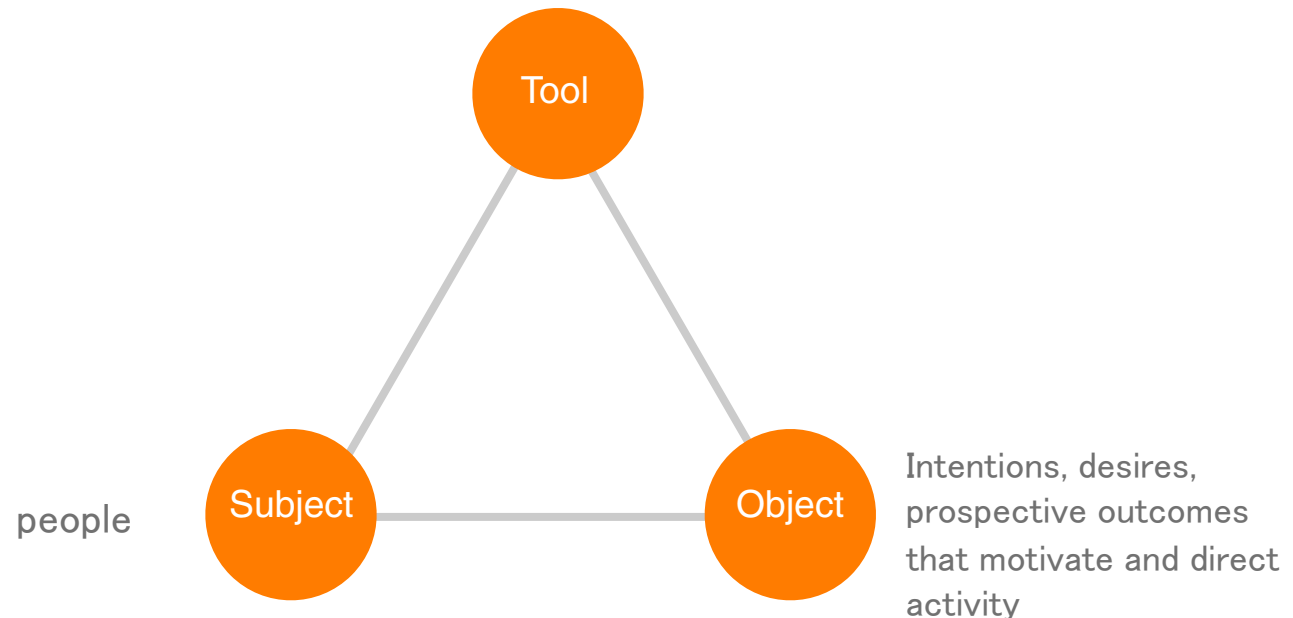
Activity Theory

Unit of Analysis
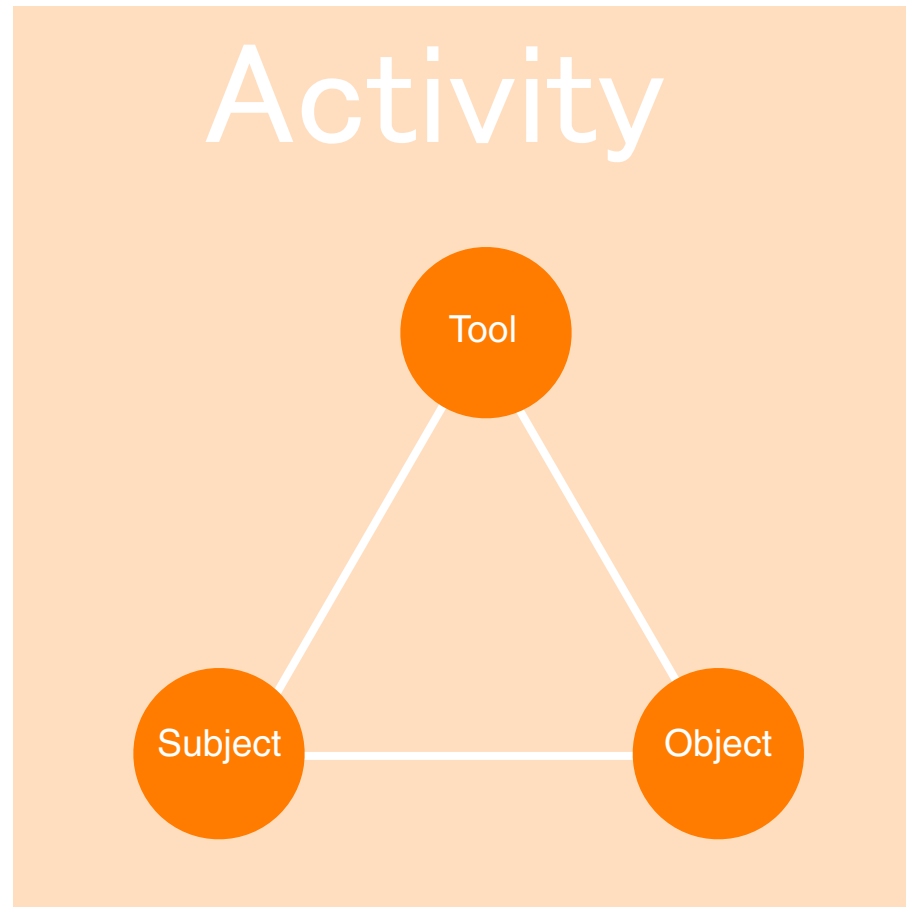
Activity Theory

Example 1

A software team programming a system for a client

Tool — computers, programming tools

the team — Subject

Object — bug–free application
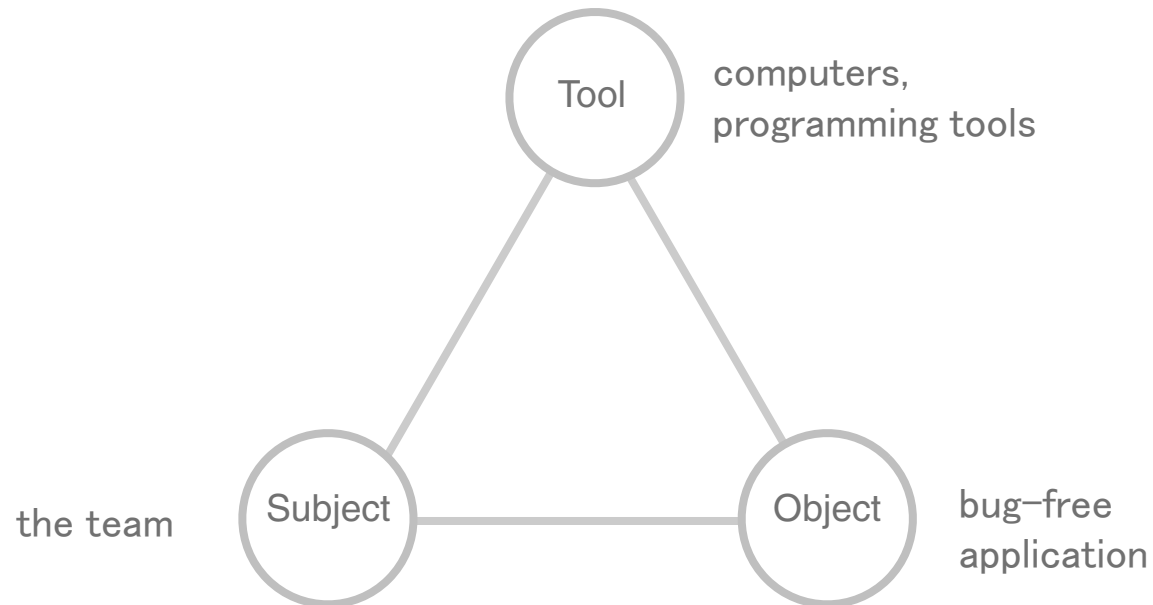
Activity Theory

Example 2

Being a graduate student at UC Berkeley

Tool — books, computers, colleagues, courses, professors

student — Subject

Object — learning, graduating, finding a job, having fun
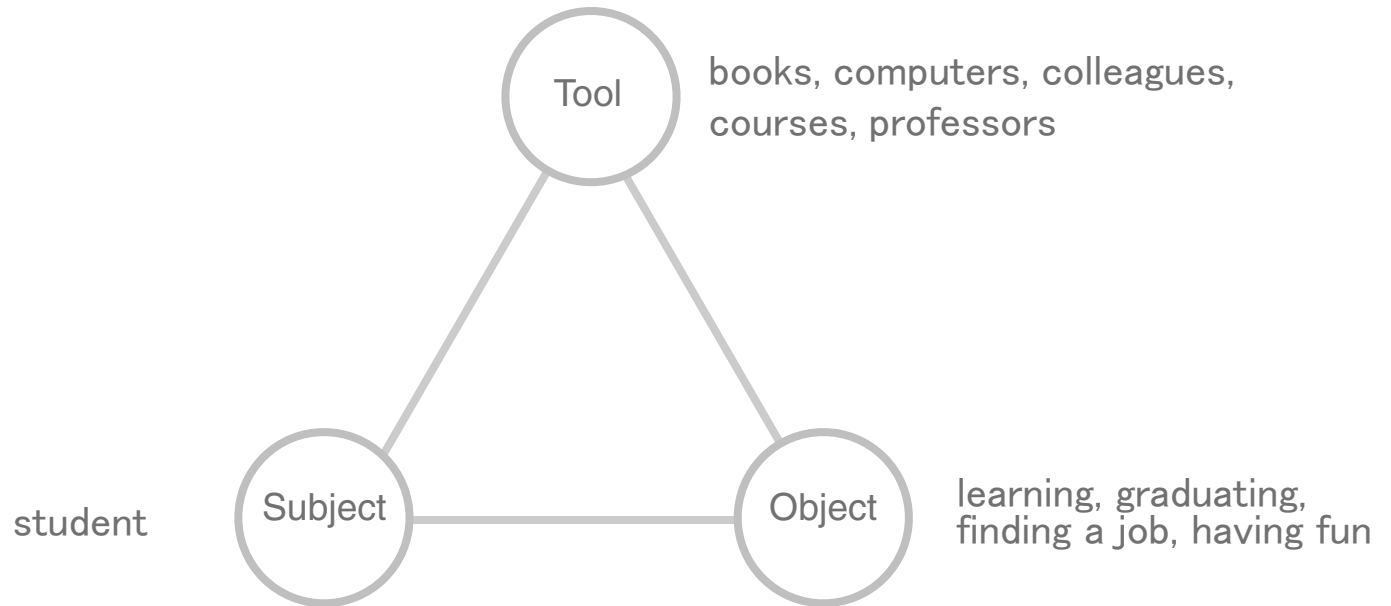
Activity Theory Concepts

- Hierarchical structure of activity

- Object-oriented

- Internalization and Externalization

- Tool mediation

- Development

Activity Theory

Hierarchical Structure

Activity

Actions

conscious
goal-oriented

Operations

automatic,
unconscious

Activity Theory
Hierarchical Structure

Example 1

□	**Activity**	Building a house
□ □ □	**Actions**	Putting the roof up, transporting bricks by truck
□ □ □ □ □	**Operations**	Hammering, changing gears when driving

Activity Theory
Hierarchical Structure

Example 2

☐	**Activity**	Completing a software project
☐ ☐ ☐	**Actions**	Programming a module, arranging meetings
☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	**Operations**	Using OS

Activity Theory

Hierarchical Structure

Example 3

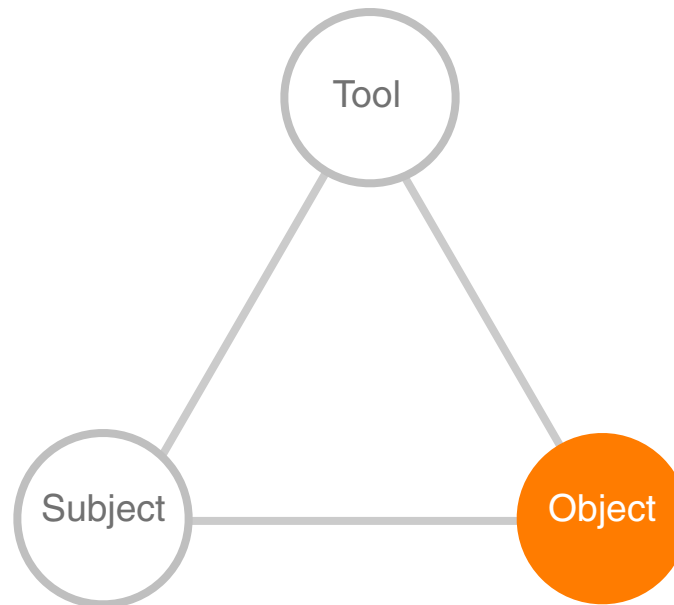|		
	Activity	Being a grad student
	Actions	Passing exams
	Operations	???

Activity Theory

Object

Object gives meaning to what people do.
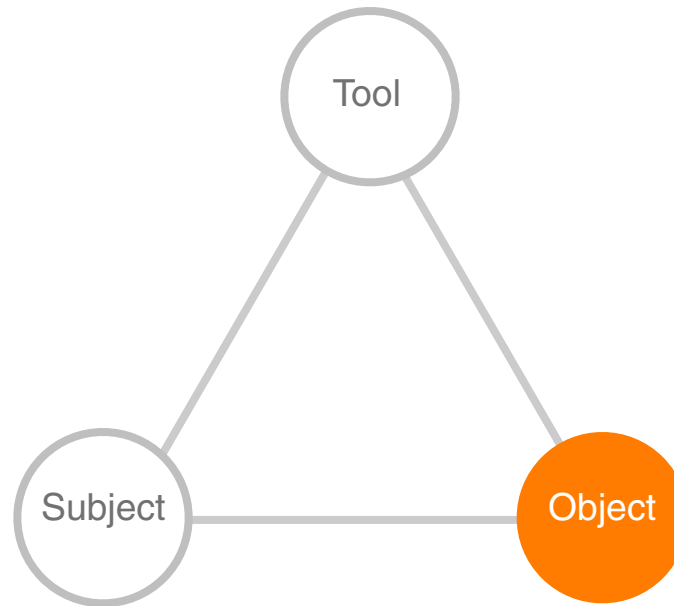Objects separate one activity from another.

Intentions, desires, prospective outcomes that motivate and direct activity

Activity Theory

Object

Can be physical thing or ideal object
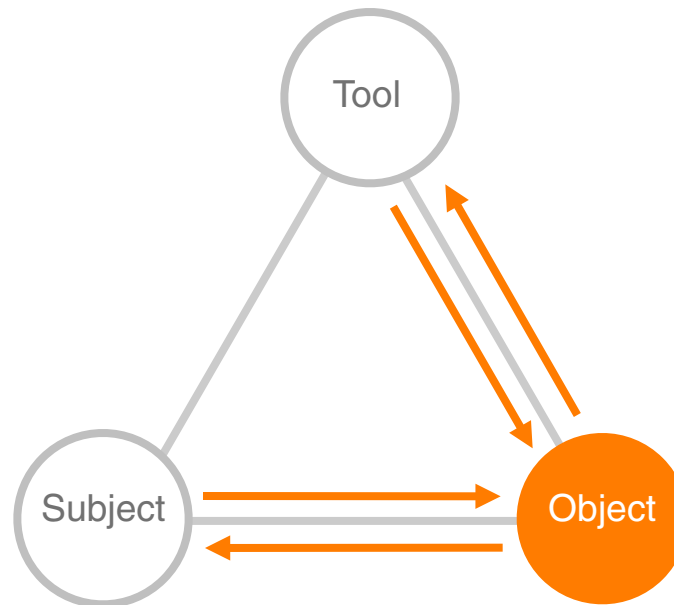

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Tool

Subject

Object

Intentions, desires, prospective outcomes that motivate and direct activity

Activity Theory

Object

Object is shaped by explicit and implicit rules, norms, and requirements existing in the local and the wider community.

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Activity unfolds in a
social context, transforming
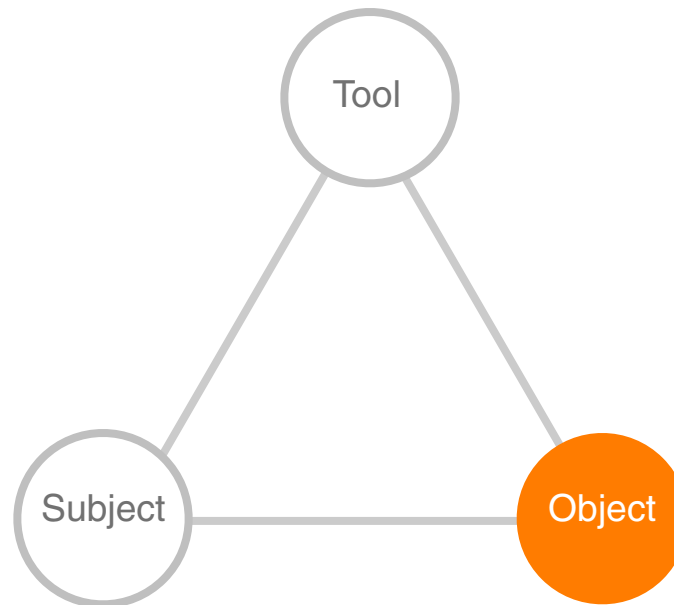both the subject and the tool.

Tool

Subject

Object

Intentions, desires,
prospective outcomes
that motivate and direct
activity

35

Activity Theory

Object

The world provides **resistance** and **affordances** to our attempts to reach the object of our activities.

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Objects constrain and direct what we do.

Tool

Subject

Object

Intentions, desires, prospective outcomes that motivate and direct activity

Activity Theory

Internal and External Activity

Internal activity: e.g., counting numbers in your head

External activity: e.g., counting numbers with your fingers

Activity Theory: Internalization / Externalization
Internalization

Transformation of external activities into internal ones. Means for people to try potential interactions with reality without performing actual manipulation with real objects (mental simulations, imaginings, considering alternative plans, etc.).

Activity Theory: Internalization / Externalization

Externalization

Transforms internal activities into external ones. It is important when a collaboration between several people requires their activities to be performed externally in order to be coordinated.

Activity Theory

Tools and Mediation

Tools shape the way human beings interact with reality. The shaping of external activities eventually results in the shaping of internal ones, and vice versa.
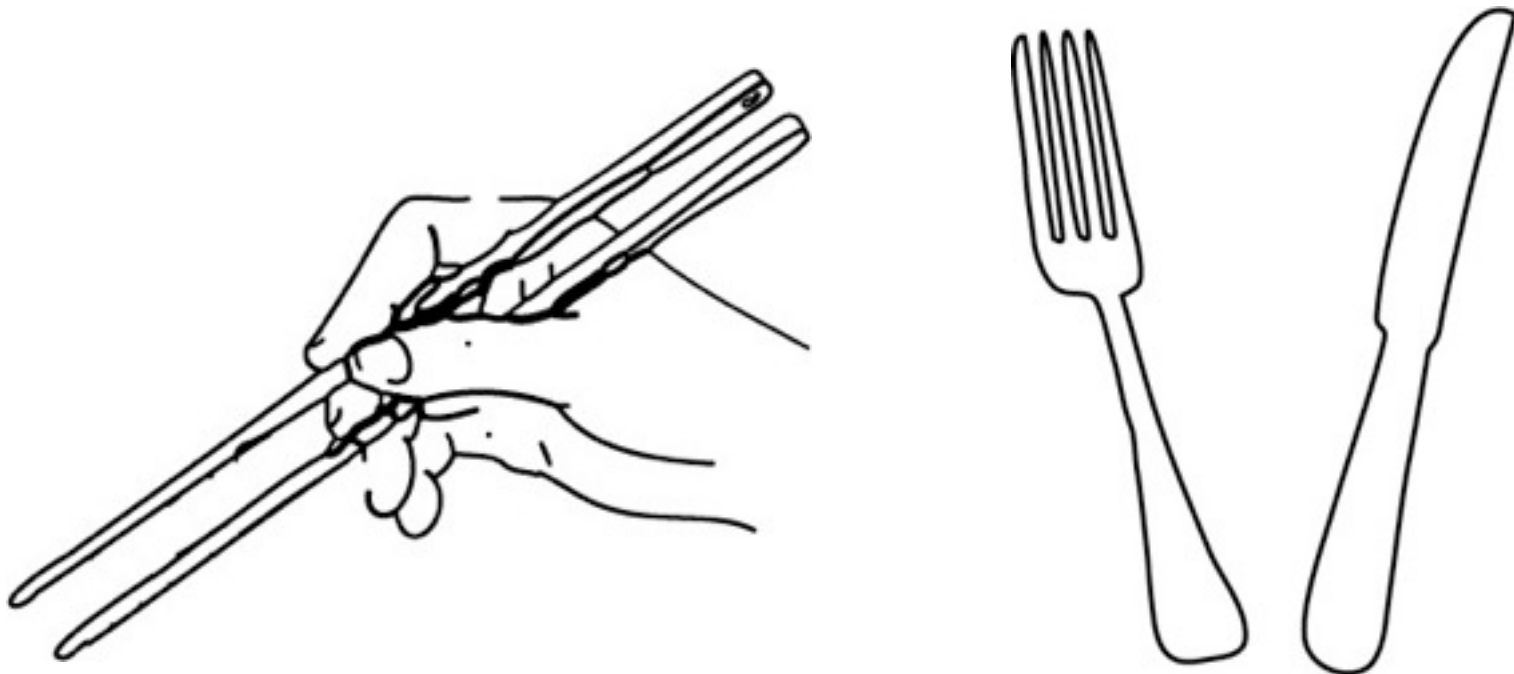
Tool

Subject   Object
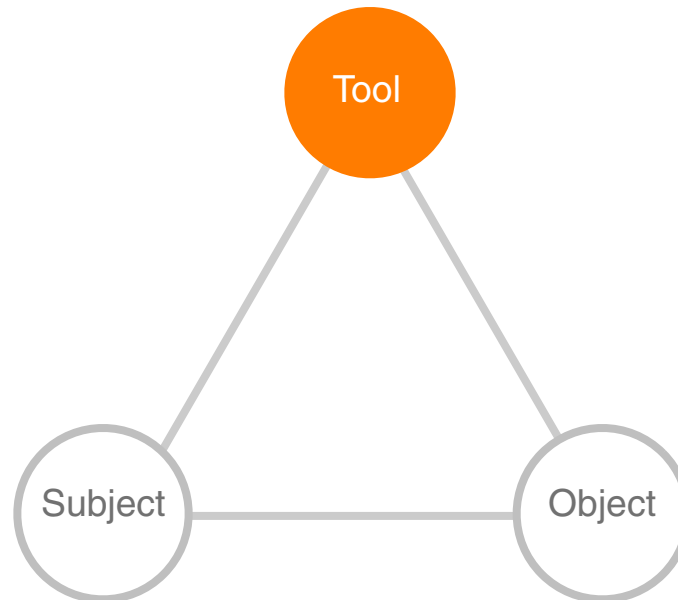
Activity Theory

Tools and Mediation

Use of tools is an accumulation and transmission of social knowledge.

Their experience is accumulated in the structural properties of tools, such as their shape or material, as well as in the knowledge of how the tool should be used.
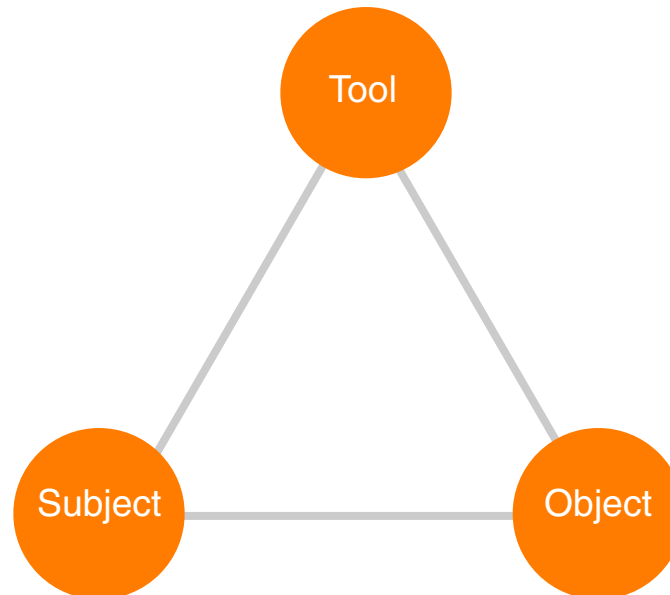
Activity Theory
Development

Human activity unfolds over time in a historical frame.

The long view: we cannot understand activity if we do not watch it cycle, grow, change. It would be desirable to establish a practice of design in which the development of users – their ability to grow and change with technology.
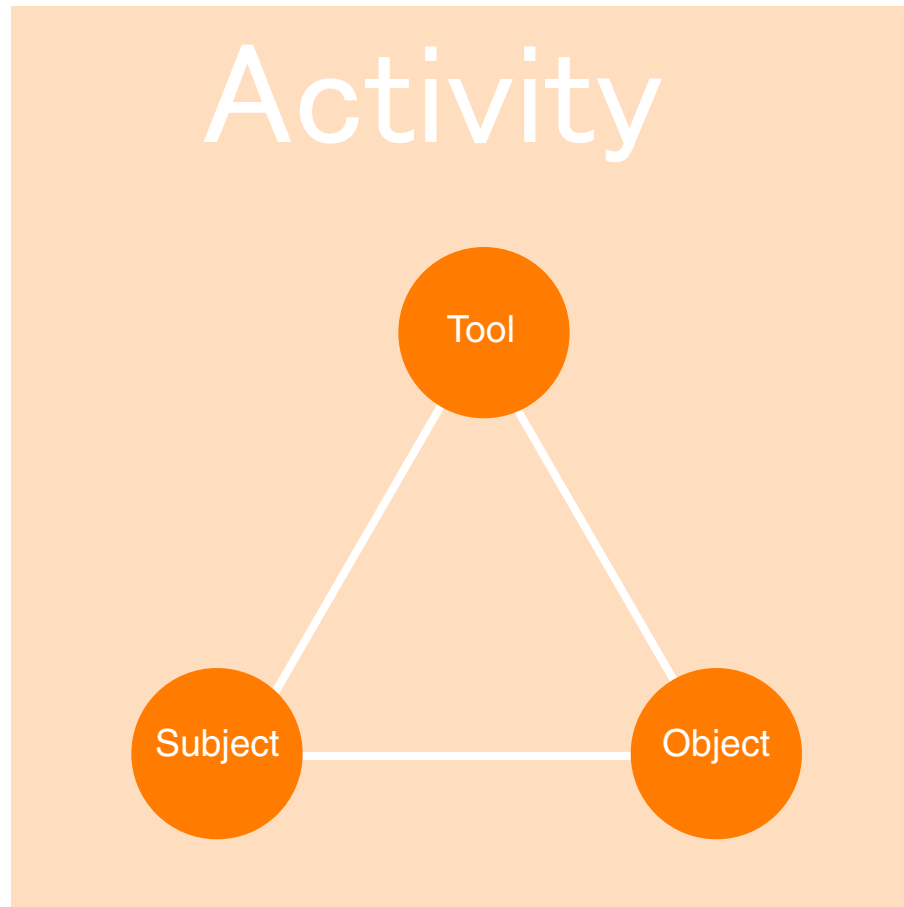
Activity Theory: Summary

- Hierarchical structure of activity
- Object-oriented
- Internalization and Externalization
- Tool mediation
- Development

Why Should We Care about Activity Theory?
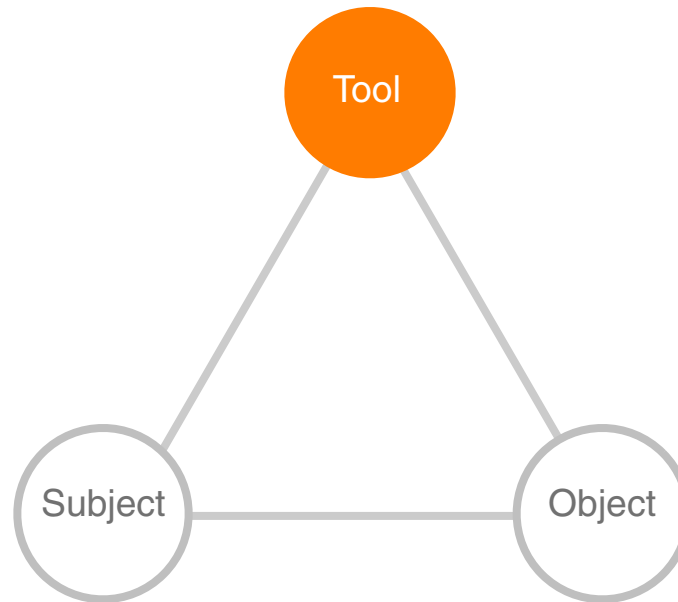
Designing Human Activities, Not Just Tools

Thanks!