Mid-Century Modern Furniture Identification App:
Using the Naturalist Field Guide Model for Mobile Identification and Learning

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Abstract

Currently one of the most popular styles of home décor, Mid Century Modern (MCM) identifies a period of design between approximately 1933 and 1965 and is typified by minimalist clean lines and classic design. Outlets for collector acquisition of this style of furniture include garage sales, flea markets, thrift stores, vintage and antiques shops, along with a variety of online shopping sources. Studying the Mid-Century design era, the popular designers and their specific creations in order to become fluent enough to confidently identify a piece in the field requires both time and diligence. In the absence of either, a shopper routinely turns to the internet for answers.

Unfortunately, the internet offers up as many wrong answers as it has right ones and searches made from the shopping field are time consuming and often fail to provide the required information. The need for an alternative to Google searching is obvious and may be found in a mobile app designed specifically to identify Mid Century Modern furniture while out in the field. An app designed for field identification while shopping could provide an attribution and valuation to a piece, while also supporting a longer-term education in how to identify and recall specific iconic Mid-Century Modern furniture pieces.

This paper explores the creation of a well-designed mobile field guide-style app for on the fly identifications by identifying similar style apps. It also explores how the purposeful design and inclusion of specific app features supports ease of use and further learning of the subject matter contained within the app.
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Introduction

Problem Statement

The increasing popularity of Mid-Century Modern furniture and decorative housewares has expanded the population of shoppers scouring flea markets and thrift stores for a diamond in the rough. Shoppers and resellers of this style of furniture are searching both for pieces that they find aesthetically pleasing, as well as verified designer-made pieces that are both highly prized and priced by the resale community. Identifying and verifying the provenance of an MCM piece is an acquired skill as information is learned and can be recalled on the fly. While this learning is taking place, a shopper may engage in often fruitless, always time-consuming internet searches as they attempt to identify a piece found in the field. Time is of the essence when shopping the second-hand market as by design, every piece is unique and there are rarely, if ever, multiple of a single item available. Decisions must be made quickly and efficiently before another shopper purchases the piece out from under you. This need for swift, on-the-fly access to information makes portability and accessibility of information the primary concerns of the Mid-Century Modern furniture identification app. Recognizing this need has led to the following project questions:

How do you create a prototype mobile application for MCM furniture identification, based upon the field guide model, that will out-perform Google searches?

What features are most useful in an identification app?
What features would MCM shoppers and mobile app users want to see to make utilizing an identification app on the go most effective?

How can the interface be organized to be sufficiently useful without being visually crowded?

What design elements would be most beneficial to a shopper trying to identify a furniture piece on the fly?

Could users benefit from an interactive area within the app – such as a message board?

Limitations

While the ultimate goal for the app would be to encompass all major modernist designers within the entire Mid-Century Modern time period, the initial version of the app would be forced to limit furniture pieces and designers. This prototype format would include a fixed number of entries in order to test app design and features and make revisions based upon user feedback. The app would not allow users to log information about the furniture they have encountered while shopping as this could easily be accomplished within their own mobile phone.

Literature Review

Using the Naturalist Field Guide as a Model

The current default practice of Google-searching to identify Mid Century Modern furniture pieces is impractical and time consuming while yielding inconsistent results. While I
have not found existing similar apps whose purpose is to identify furniture in general, let alone to specifically identify Mid-Century Modern furniture, I have noted the practicality of other kinds of identification resources including naturalist field guides and more specifically bird identification guides. The clean aesthetic of bird field guide books which systematically present the most identifiable features of a given bird to aide in the viewer’s correct identification serve as a useful model for a similar field guide for furniture. Looking to both paperback birding field guides as well their digital versions, bird identification apps, for inspiration, I have identified various attributes which may translate well to a furniture identification field guide app.

The foremost of which is the abundance of photographs for comparison and identification as well as to scrutinize distinguishing details of a piece. No matter the methods of delivery for an image, the image itself is a powerful tool. A “. . . technology in any form is just the vehicle for the enduring image. ‘In an era of information overload, the photograph provides a quick way of apprehending something and a compact form for memorizing it,’ said Susan Sontag. ‘The photograph is like a quotation, or a maxim or proverb.’ (Sontag, 2002) This deflection of reality makes us all detached spectators, she says, and although we can’t imagine what it was like to be in the image, we are, nevertheless, always drawn towards it.” (Kovarik, 2018, p179).

The app will incorporate multiple photographs of each furniture piece within its database in an attempt to illustrate the various angles and viewpoints required for positive identification. Another key image-related feature will be to provide closeups of unique attributes or tell-tale signs of a furniture piece’s pedigree. Just as the bird field guides point out a particular eye marking or beak shape, so too the app will draw the user’s attention to a credenza’s handle hardware or a chair’s arm rest connection. In this way, a shopper can verify the authenticity
(within reasonable parameters) of a furniture piece by comparison to the specimen presented in the MCM Furniture ID app.

**Existing Identification Apps**

“By 2014, over 1,200 apps were submitted per day for review, compared to only about thirty-eight per day in 2008. Open architecture systems, such as the Google Android for mobile phone/information devices held the promise of a more flexible system. By 2015, 43 percent of US mobile phones were using Apple systems.” (Kovarik, 2018, p374). The app market has exploded with entertainment and educational apps alike and yet, there is no single existing app for the identification of furniture. The majority of furniture identification technology that I have found have been web-based forums or services (for example the paid service offered by valuemystuff.com) or mobile phone based apps including Google lens/Google image search, Social media apps such as Houzz and Pinterest. I have found a handful of apps whose main purpose is identification albeit usually identifying plants and animals. Among the much more prolific bird identification app selection available in the Apple app store, Merlin Bird ID by Cornell Lab and the Audubon Bird App stand out for their adherence to the original field guide model while successfully incorporating technology. It is these apps, along with the paperback field guides that will serve as both visual and functional inspiration for the Mid-Century Modern Furniture ID app.

Digital field guides serve as either replacement or complement to the original field guide, the physical book, while allowing for easy and compact access to information, the ability to organize information and even share information with other users. Furthermore, digital tools afford access to information to an ever-wider audience. “Next-generation field guides are user
friendly, permit quality control and the revision of data; are scalable to accommodate burgeoning data; protect content and privacy while allowing broad public access; and are adaptable to ever-changing platforms and browsers.” (Farnsworth et al, 2013, p 891).

In reference to the number of apps currently available or in use specifically in the field of ecology, Teacher et al explains that “Despite the large number of apps available, the literature on how these apps were developed and used is very limited, and as such there is currently a barrier for app-rehensive researchers to develop their own app.” (Teacher et al, 2013, p 5269). This is a problem for all would-be app creators as the available data on the successes and failures of apps already available to the public is limited. The best research available is simple hands-on, direct usage in order to personally observe how an app functions for a new user. Unfortunately, what this approach does not clarify is how an app functions over time (assuming that any trial period is limited by a variety of constraints).

**Success of Mobile Apps**

A number of elements contribute to the successful design of an app interface including ease of access to information, successful retrieval of information sought, ease of navigation, whether a user can easily add information, and whether the app will allow for user feedback. Digital field guides and their contents “... often use a variety of media, including text, drawing, photographs, audio, and video, set in visually appealing user interfaces that facilitate taxon identification with a minimum of steps (Leggett and Kirchoff 2011). Pop-up windows or hyperlinked glossaries define technical terms. The clever use of multimedia and machine-learning algorithms makes stand-alone apps and online guides simultaneously accessible to
beginners and useful for specialists. Together, these features increase the accuracy of identification, offer rewards for the user and encourage learning.” (Farnsworth et al, 2013, p 892). The ability of an app to contain both high resolution photographs and a database-worth of information, provides a successful marriage of data and design for this type of purpose. (Shrode, 2012). In one study involving students using their smartphone to identify birds, a vast majority of students claimed that using a smartphone app for the task improved both their efficiency and their enjoyment. (Hidayat et al, 2018).

**Success of Mobile Learning**

As a secondary element to mobile identification, the MCM Furniture ID app may also serve as a learning tool. Mobile learning, for this purpose defined as learning with a mobile device, has the benefits of flexibility of place, time, and context. Users can engage with information in the app and learn anywhere, anytime and most importantly, when they are in a particular situation with furniture in the field. (Wang, 2017). To ensure the greatest likelihood of success with learning with a mobile tool, two of the most important elements to consider are the user interface and how well an app conforms to user needs. (Walker, 2011) Additionally, mobile apps have the capacity to provide a number of potential learning affordances including portability, social interactivity/collaboration, connectivity, and can deliver invaluable resources to the user as well as serve as a device capable of capturing information. (Churchill et al, 2015).

**Design and Usability**

The most functional mobile field guides incorporate ease of navigation with features that allow for quality comparisons between the available reference material and the specimen found in the field.
A primary consideration in any app design process should be identifying your average user in order to fully understand who will use the app and how they will use it. Whether apps are developed for work or play, a well-designed app will appeal to a wide range of users and encourage regular usage. (Teacher et al, 2013). Structurally, that means that an app should be easy as well as entertaining to use. Most apps follow similar conventions, including a user registration upon first startup, a home page with instructional information on how to navigate the app, a toolbar along the top or bottom of the screen that allows a user to navigate to the most often used areas of the app. (Teacher et al, 2013). Building upon these basics, the next goal is to optimize the user’s experience – to minimize failure and maximize positive outcomes and associations with the app. This can be accomplished via a number of considerations including optimal use of color, type face, and graphics, as well as care in design of navigation. “The main goals of tool-centric apps are to identify the motivations and requirements of consumers in using/buying products and to develop services to assist consumers in these processes.” (Zhao & Balague, 2015, p307).

“Good mobile apps are aligned with different levels of user motivation and should engage them passionately. Intrinsic motivations for the use of mobile apps . . . include entertainment, functionality, information, socialization, intellectual stimulation, following a trend, and learning.” (Zhao & Balague, 2015, p314). By coupling the app’s intended purpose – the identification of Mid-Century Modern furniture – with good design principles, the potential for successful and repeated usage increases.

Results
As Teacher, et al so eloquently express, “The phone in our pocket deserves better application as a collector and handler of data, while its inbuilt links to the internet reveal the potential for
real-time information flow between collectors, databases, interpreters and users of information.” (Teacher et al, 2013, p5277). To capitalize on the accessibility and portability of the mobile phone, with its expansive memory and the capacity for interaction, seems an inevitable next step. Likewise, building from the successes of field guides in areas of the sciences extends a well-worn logic to the similar but different endeavor of furniture identification. This can be accomplished by creating a digital version of the physical naturalist field guides with an emphasis on ease of navigation and an abundance of images to compare with the field specimen. Finally, to encourage the regular usage and learning of new information, the app must be mindful of the user interface and how well the app conforms to the user’s requirements.

**Methodology**

**Background material**

The data gathering process included searching the Apple App Store for existing apps of the identification style, both within the area of furniture and extending to other areas such as animal and plant life. Discovering how these apps presented information and how successful their functions were for users was a valuable part of the research process. An additional data gathering activity included the review of how information is presented in physical field guides that assist users in identifying birds. A final data gathering activity involved combing various internet sources for information useful to the identification of Mid-Century Modern furniture. This activity helped to inform what identifying features to call attention to within the main area of the furniture ID app where individual furniture pieces are cataloged and available for comparison to a user’s furniture item in the field.
Current and Inspirational Identification Apps

The most popular current method of Mid-Century Modern furniture identification is use of a combination of printed reference guides in the form of books including *Mid-Century Modern: Furniture of the 1950s* by Cara Greenberg, *Fifties Furniture with Values* by Leslie Pina, and *1000 Chairs* by Charlotte and Peter Fiell, as well as magazines such as Atomic Ranch and Dwell. Another common existing resource for furniture identification is the practice of patchworking knowledge together from the World Wide Web including Googling keywords, running a reverse Google image search, searching eBay active and sold listings, reading through various blogs, message boards and Facebook groups. While sometimes effective, these methods are extremely time consuming, cumbersome and often enough, yield no positive identification.

To my knowledge there are no mobile apps in existence designed to assist in the identification of Mid-Century Modern furniture. There are however a number of bird and plant identification apps modeled upon their predecessor, the physical field guide. A few of these apps include the Audubon Bird Guide app, Bird ID Master, and Seek by iNaturalist. Each of these apps provides a combination of reference images and descriptive text to assist users in the process of identification. Studying their layout and app flow was useful in determining what is most user-friendly and intuitive for identification in the field.
American Robin
*Turdus migratorius*

**ABOUT**
The American robin (*Turdus migratorius*) is a migratory songbird of the true thrush genus and Turdidae, the wider thrush family. It is named after the European robin, whether or not there is any genetic evidence of a common ancestor.

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Figure 1: Detail pages of field guide apps. Left, Seek app, Middle and Right, Audubon App

**Paper-based field guides as inspiration**
Paper-based field guides for birds served as my original inspiration for creating a similar digital field guide for furniture identification. Books such as the *Kaufman Field Guide to Birds of North America*, *Peterson Field Guides Birds of Eastern and Central North America*, and *National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America* are three examples of physical field guide books that provide identification guidance based largely upon illustrations which point out identifying markers for identifying specific birds. A single page of these books will present images of different variations illustrating sub-species of a species, a male, a female, a juvenile and/or action images of a bird in flight or while plunging into the water to feed. These illustrations also point out identifying markers specific to each bird species and sub-species, such as eye rings, wing bars and crown stripes. To further support the user in making a positive identification, these field guides include a small amount of text to further clarify the particular identifying markers of a bird as well as to provide information about variations, similar species, geographical range and habitat. Together the text descriptions and extensive imagery allow a user to make reasonably well-informed decisions about what bird species they have encountered in the field.
Figure 2: Detail pages of Bird Field Guides. Left, *National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America*, Middle and Right, *Peterson Field Guides Birds of Eastern and Central North America*

**Preparing for Design Process**
Early design decisions for the app included determining a color scheme that is both conducive to ease of user navigation as well as representative of the Mid-Century Modern era. Likewise, decisions about typefaces, layout, app flow as well as spatial considerations such as the amount of information to include versus the need for a visually unobtrusive interface were all an important part of the early design process. Sketching out app design and flow possibilities before using Photoshop and Illustrator to solidify design decisions allowed for early brainstorming without getting hung up on the aesthetic details of each page.

**Design Elements**

In addition to the primary purpose of identifying a piece of furniture, features of the app may include a brief historical background, designer’s name, production dates, available color ways and/or fabrics, country of origin, etc. Additionally, an option to “see similar” could link to furniture look-a-likes which could further assist in the identification process.

**Information Design Principles**

Using a variety of key design principles, the app will organize the way that information, both visual and textual, is presented and will strive to optimize the process of learning and recall through repetitive use. In terms of overall appearance, the aesthetic-usability effect will be considered when designing how the app will appear. “Aesthetic designs look easier to use and have a higher probability of being used, whether or not they actually are easier to use. More usable but less-aesthetic designs may suffer a lack of acceptance that renders issues of usability moot.” (Lidwell, 2010). The use of color will be conservative and reflect the desire to draw users visually without presenting a distraction or impediment to the goal of presenting useful
identification information. Each page of the app will employ consistency as the “. . . usability of a system is improved when similar parts are expressed in similar ways.” (Lidwell, 2010, p 46). Employing aesthetic consistency will focus on the style of the app i.e. imagery, typeface and overall mood, while the practice of internal consistency ensures that all areas of the app appear connected and part of a cohesive design. “Within any logical grouping elements should be aesthetically and functionally consistent with one another.” (Lidwell, 2010, p 46). In terms of aesthetic design of pages within the app, the principle of highlighting – judicial use of changes in color and typeface characteristics for example – can assist in drawing user’s attention to key elements of a design without rendering the entire field of view a chaotic mess. Recognizing the flexibility-usability tradeoff, the design of the app should remain as structured as possible while allowing for flexibility where needed. This might mean at first limiting categories of the app to types of furniture i.e. chairs, tables, storage while being open to adding categories in the future such as wall art or kitchenware, should these needs become clear based upon use of the app. Finally, the picture superiority effect “. . . is commonly used in instructional design, advertising, technical writing, and other design contexts requiring easy and accurate recall of information.” (Lidwell, 2010, p 152) and preferences the use of images combined with text for optimized learning. “The first experimental psychologists, Wilhelm Wundt and Williams James, observed in the 1890s that images – not words – were the building blocks of human psychology (Thomas 2010). The insight was confirmed by twentieth-century experiments on the “picture superiority effect” showing that concepts are much more likely to be remembered when they are presented as images rather than words (Nelwson, et al. 1976).” (Kovarik, 2018, p 141). While the app is primarily a tool for identification, for which the use of photographs to compare with will be key,
it is also a learning tool that will allow users to build on their knowledge and recall through continued use.

In terms of organization, the app will use expository advanced organizers in the form of introductory information that identifies a category, a designer, a country of origin, historical significance, etc. before delving into more specific information about how to identify this specific piece. (Lidwell, 2010). This provides grounding information upon which new information may be added to allow a user tools with which to identify the piece in question. The app will be created around the principle of recognition over recall which states that “memory for recognizing things is better than memory for recalling things.” (Lidwell, 2010, p 164) Rather than recalling the information required to identify their furniture piece in the field, a user would have much more success accessing a visual database that will provide useful clues towards field identification of specific pieces. Likewise, the structure of the app will follow this principle by creating an easily navigable structure of menus and buttons that aid users in finding the information they need quickly. Another principle that will assist with organization of information is the practice of comparison. Through the process of comparison, a user of the app will begin to understand the unique shapes, patterns and markings inherent to the particular furniture piece in question. (Lidwell, 2010). This is exactly how the app is intended to be used – the user comparing a piece of furniture found in a thrift shop to the same or similar piece of furniture in the app. By properly utilizing the principle of the von Restorff Effect, the app will make key areas of importance for a user to note as visually different as possible – through the use of close up views and highlighted descriptive detail sections. Making these points stand out from the rest of the information on the screen will ensure a user’s attention is drawn to the important identifying areas of a piece of furniture. The app may employ the principle of layering, using a
layering of visual information that allows for understanding of complex ideas within a single visual environment. (Lidwell, 2010) This would provide a closeup view of a chair for example by opening a popup window without leaving the primary page of that chair and thus confusing a user that wants to return to the original view.

What would compel a user to continue use?

Primarily, a user will continue to use an app when it serves its purpose – in this case, to easily identify field specimens of Mid Century-Modern furniture. Features that may keep a user further engaged in the app include routinely updated information on available furniture items, continuously adding to the number of furniture pieces within the database, and perhaps interactivity with other users of the app and fellow furniture collectors via a chat or messenger board feature.

Creating the Prototype

In order to establish a strong foundation of Mid-Century Modern furniture identification pages for the app, I began by researching what the most iconic MCM furniture might be. Using various internet sources, books and articles, I cast a wide net and whittled the number down to 12 in an effort to provide a representative cross section of iconic designer MCM furniture. This variety of selection also allowed for the opportunity to showcase how the app would prove useful in calling attention to the various identifying features of a particular piece. As prototyping progressed, I further winnowed the number of pieces highlighted in the app to allow for focusing on key user functions without becoming visually overwhelming.
I hand sketched features that I would like to include in the app as a way of working through optimal location and placement of various elements. The following list of actions are available within the app: the Home icon will return a user to the home screen, the Field Guide icon brings a user to the identification pages which may be searched by family i.e. furniture type or alphabetically by the designer’s name, the Search icon allows searching by keywords and performs searches in all app areas including a user’s saved list and messages within the message board, the Saved icon is a list of a user’s favorited furniture pages for quick reference, and the Message Board icon brings a user to the interactive message board that is further subdivided into topics including General Discussion, Identification, Designers, and Repair/Care.

Finally, I explored a variety of web-based prototype software before deciding to use proto.io for its functionality, versatility and interface.

MCM Furniture Identification App Opening Screen

The opening screen for the MCM Furniture Identification App displays the Mid-Century Modern Furniture Identification logo and provides a user with two options: “Identify a piece of furniture” which brings a user to the Field Guide portion of the app and “Search” which allows a user to search the entirety of the app. Keeping the options simple and focused at the opening screen will minimize confusion as well as the need for lengthy introductions or instructions. Keeping with the mission of the app, to allow for faster and more successful furniture identifications in the field, the welcome screen will get right to the point and offer users only the primary purpose of the app – to get started identifying.
MCM Furniture Identification App Field Guide Features

The primary feature and main focus of the app is the field guide style entries of Mid-Century Modern furniture pieces complete with multiple photographs, detailed photos and text highlighting unique identifiable features as well as descriptive information about a furniture piece’s designer, origin and history. This area will be where users spend most of their time and will allow for searching the available entries in multiple way – by family, alphabetically or with the Search icon which searches all app areas. Searching by family will allow a user to search by furniture type i.e. chair and then scroll alphabetically through a list of chairs which includes a thumbnail image and the name of the chair. Alternately, a user can search alphabetically by designer, choosing a designer’s name to reveal a list of that designer’s included furniture pieces along with a thumbnail image and the name of the furniture piece. The furniture detail page will include multiple photographs of the piece of furniture allowing for presentation of various angles and where relevant, undersides of furniture. Furniture photos will also include clickable highlight points that reference a unique characteristic of the piece that would be helpful in making an identification. Clicking on the highlight point will open a window with a closeup image or text box containing additional detail. The number of close-up detail screens will change based upon the furniture piece – some may have many while others none. Finally, there will be two links on each furniture page – one titled “description” will link to anchor point within the page offering a description of the piece including the designer, country of origin and relevant historical information while the other link titled “similar” will link to a page of thumbnails of visually similar pieces of furniture. The inclusion of links to similar items will provide search assistance
for users who have ruled out the primary page as their furniture piece and require additional searching to confirm an identification for their piece in question.

User Interaction within MCM Furniture Identification App

The option for a message board within the app allows for interaction between app users who may wish to ask questions about particularly difficult identifications, ask for second opinions about questionable identifications and compare notes about designers, valuations and other sundry topics associated with Mid-Century Modern furniture collection and identification. Message board area of interest could include General Discussion, Identification, Designers, and Repair/Care.

Platforms
Relevant platforms for app download include the Appstore for Apple for iPhone and iPad as well as Google Play for Android.

Summary

Next Steps

While outside of the scope of this project, future steps could include the expansion of the visual database of the app to include additional furniture pieces which would create a more universally useful app. Additionally, expansion could include sub categories that identify furniture by geographical region as a means of adding search filters and increasing possible matches. Next steps could also include field testing of the app to assess functionality in real world scenarios. Areas of testing could include ease of navigation, time to successful identification, and user rating of likelihood of repeated use.

Conclusion

The purpose of the app is to fulfill a need in the Mid-Century Modern collecting and reselling community for a tool to assist in the identification and authentication of vintage furniture pieces found in the field. Usage of this app will reduce the amount of time spent combing the web for relevant search returns that will assist in field identification while shopping a flea market, thrift store or garage sale.

The goals in creating the app included building in highly functional features for users to easily navigate and successfully identify a furniture piece in question. Using birding field guides as a visually jumping off point, the app provides comparison images, highlights characteristic
features that assist in identification, and provides background information including designer, country of origin and relevant information for identification.

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