



tel·lu·ric¹ [te-loor-ik]

—adjective

1. of or pertaining to the earth; terrestrial.
2. of or proceeding from the earth or soil.

ORIGIN mid 19th cent.: from Latin *tellus*, *tellur-* 'earth'.



telluricAesthetic is an online gallery of user-created avatars based on perceptions of the Philadelphia cultural aesthetic.

The gallery will allow viewers to compare perceived differences and commonalities of Philadelphia's cultural subgroups. Each avatar samples the symbolic connections people make between personal artifacts (e.g. clothing and accessories) and cultural labels.



Part I.

EXPLORE

- a. Introduction
- b. Scope
- c. Process
- d. Interaction
- e. Technology
- f. Budget

Part II.

GENERATE

- a. Interviews
- b. Illustrations

Part III.

CREATE

- a. User Workflows
- b. Site Map
- c. Schematics
- d. Prototype

Part IV:

COMMUNICATE

- a. Visual Research
- b. Branding
- c. Web Media
- d. Print Media



Part I.

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telluricAesthetic

You are walking down the street in Center City Philadelphia on your lunch break and scan the sidewalks. You see a snooty business woman in a pantsuit, a punk kid in baggy jeans on a skateboard, a young Hispanic guy riding his Huffly up the sidewalk, and a small gathering of dolled-up hipster girls smoking outside the art school.

In your haste to get to your favorite café, you brush by a grisly courier who has just finished locking up his bike and nearly cause him to drop the fragile package he is carrying. “Hey, watch it!” he yells. You barely look over your shoulder as you retort, “Ah, get a real job!”

“Impetuous couriers..” you grumble to yourself.

“Stuck-up business people,” mutters the courier. Little do you know that the two of you both have a strong affinity for Indian cuisine and obscure French films.

Introduction

According to Britannica.com, a telluric current is a “natural electric current flowing on and beneath the surface of the Earth.” (<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9071609/telluric-current>, 05.08.08)

Wikipedia states telluric currents “result from both natural causes and human activity, and the discrete currents interact in a complex pattern.” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Telluric_current, 05.08.08)

The concept behind telluricAesthetic is that there are subtle but powerful undercurrents of meaning that pervade our society’s

cultural groups. Because of the fast pace and short attention span of our society, we tend to overlook the depth of cultural meaning and instead focus on what we see solely on the surface—cultural aesthetics.

In the book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Dick Hebdige applies a semiotic interpretation to the subcultures that emerged during the 1960s and 70s in the United Kingdom. He first lays the foundation for this analysis with a citation of the *Oxford English Dictionary’s* lengthy definition of culture. It begins with “the action or practice of cultivating the soil; tillage,” and a bit further states, “the cultivation or development (of the mind, faculties, manners), improvement or refinement by education and training.” (Hebdige, 5) Hebdige explains how the various schools of thought that surrounded the idea of culture beginning in the late eighteenth century have evolved over the past several centuries, largely through the channels of literary criticism. Both Raymond Williams and Roland Barthes examined culture through the lens of the signification of cultural meaning and values. (ibid., 6)

My aim in this project is to adopt a similar semiotic approach and apply it to the various cultural groups predominant in Philadelphia. However, I am no literary critic or media theorist. I am interested in using semiotics as an interpretive tool for effectual visual communication and design. I am also interested in propelling the current wave of social media that empower consumers to become creators and disseminators of content. To this end, I am employing a

user-centered participatory design process in which I investigate and interpret the semiotics of Philadelphia's cultural groups through their very members. My investigation seeks to answer the question:

“How do Philadelphians ages 18-30 translate personal artifacts, such as clothing and accessories, into cultural identity?”

Scope

Research Lens

Although I am a student trying my hand at research-based design, I am not so naïve as to think that my research will be untainted or that my interpretation of my research will be unbiased. Since I began living, working, and going to college in Philadelphia more than two years ago, I have become increasingly aware of the rich cultural undercurrents that pervade the city. Hipsters and bike messengers fascinate me especially because their cultural identities and behaviors stand in such stark contrast to other cultural groups in the city. Their message, though unspoken, is clear. Although they are resolute in their beliefs and causes, their population comprises some of the most open-minded people that I have ever met.

Participants and Audience

Although my particular fascination with these groups serves as a springboard for my research, I am not limiting my research to their population. My investigation involves Philadelphia residents ages

18-30, and my intended audience is any Philadelphian who has any awareness of Philadelphia's cultural groups, or at the very least has an appreciation of culture or identity.

Final Output

As stated in the project abstract, the final output of my project will be a participant-generated, avatar builder and gallery revealing the symbolic relationships between cultural identity and elements of physical appearance. The gallery will allow viewers to compare perceived differences and commonalities of Philadelphia's cultural subgroups. Each avatar samples the symbolic connections people make between personal artifacts (e.g. clothing and accessories) and cultural labels. I have decided to perpetuate this project via the World Wide Web in order to embody my view that culture, identity, and perception are fluid and dynamic.

Timeframe

The research for and conception of this project began in January 2008. A prototype comprised of the avatar builder will be functional by the end of the Fall 2008 semester. The alpha version will add the gallery and user account functionality by the end of January 2009. The beta version will be launched and promoted with a combination of web and print media beginning in March 2009.

I carried out this project in four main phases—exploration, generation, implementation, and communication. I will explain the following outline in the forthcoming process section:

I. Spring semester 2008 - pre-production

A. Exploration

B. Generation

II. Fall semester 2008 - production

A. Implementation

i. Schematics

ii. User Workflow

iii. Iteration

B. Communication

i. Promotion

ii. Presentation

iii. Website

iv. Exhibition

Goal

1. To raise my participants' and audience awareness of the differences and similarities in the way that members of Philadelphia's cultural groups use physical symbols to classify and evaluate others.
2. To sensitize my audience to the fluidity and dynamic quality of culture, identity and perception.

Constraints

In order to reduce the size of the variable set I need to address, I have chosen to constrain my field research to two aspects of cultural identity—physical identity and behavior. Examples of physical appearance attributes I am focusing on include clothing and accessory styles, hairstyles, piercing, tattoos, and the like. Although this is undoubtedly a gross over-simplification of the complex composition of both culture and identity, both narrow the scope of this project and my lack of formal training in anthropology necessitated such a constraint.

Process

Pre-production

Because my project aims to capture perceptions people have of the physical identities others create for themselves, it was necessary for me to use some cognitive modeling methods for data-collection.

A cognitive model is essentially a “psychological approximation representing the processes” by which a person “performs tasks, solve problems, and makes decisions.” (http://www.usabilityfirst.com/glossary/term_13.txt, 05.08.08)

To do this, I interviewed participants using the following questions as a springboard for the discussions:

- » How do you define culture?
- » Do you identify with a cultural group?
- » If so, which and why?
- » Can you list some physical attributes that define the style of a cultural group?
- » Can you identify five major cultural groups in Philly?
- » Can you describe the behaviors and styles of those groups?

During these discussions, I took care not to pigeon-hole participants into a discussion of physical attributes. Rather I would let them talk about whatever came to their minds initially regarding culture. Once

they voiced their ideas, I asked them specifically about the physical characteristics of cultural identity.

Finally, I asked participants to draw three of the five cultural groups they described. Of course, not everyone has the best drawing skills, so I always made sure to follow-up with questions about the physical attributes that my participants drew—i.e. style of glasses, shirts, pants, shoes, etc. This way, at the end of every interview, I had a list of physical elements that the participants associated with the physical identity of each cultural identity.

In the generation phase, I asked friends and family to send me hyperlinks to images of clothing to illustrate. Although responses were minimal, suggestions included “neo-hobos,” muslims, UPenn graduate student. Also discussed were “moms on Market,” Jefferson medical students, “fauxhemians,” dog walkers, trannies, “gangstas,” “middle-aged suits,” sporty thirty-somethings, homeless people, “fake” homeless people, Love Park skaters, and “suburba-punks.”

Production

In the production stage, I based collaboration with two illustrators as well as my final interface design on the interviews, post-it sketches, and visual research provided by acquaintances and friends. The goal was to create a digital, interactive paper-doll interface, similar in function to the Nintendo Wii’s Mii Editor. Participants will use this interface to create avatars representing their own physical identities and the identities of others. Each participant’s avatar samples the

telluricAesthetic

symbolic connections s/he make between personal artifacts (e.g. clothing and accessories) and cultural labels and is viewable in the telluricAesthetic gallery.

Interaction & Technology

User Workflow

Upon navigating to the site, users may either login with an existing account, or create a new account and profile comprised of user name, password, zip code, gender, and age bracket. The pre-existing user may view or edit his “myAesthetic” profile, or s/he may navigate to the avatar gallery. The new user will come to the Wardrobe Widget, where s/he can create his avatar. Upon completion of the avatar, the user may go to the telluricAesthetic gallery to view and filter avatars created by others. The beta version will add the functionality to tag both one’s own avatar and avatars in the gallery.

Technology

telluricAesthetic is built with Adobe Flex Builder 3 using a combination of MXML, Actionscript 3.0 and XML. The alpha and beta versions of telluricAesthetic will implement PHP and a remote MySQL database.

Budget

The budget for telluricAesthetic included \$100 for domain registration and a year of web hosting, as well as a print budget of \$100.

Abrams, Janet, and Peter Hall, ed. *Else/where: Mapping New Cartographies of Networks and Territories*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Design Institute, 2006.

Else/where is an anthology on mapping as an interpretive design process with a particular focus on the new context and application of mapping as a tool to make tangible the hidden properties of social networks and virtual communities.

Bartocci, Gerianne K. In-person discussion on Interviews and applied anthropology. 14 March 2008.

Gerianne Bartocci is a practicing anthropologist in the Human Factors department at Electronic Ink in Philadelphia. She specializes in ethnography and cognitive anthropology. Gerianne is providing guidance and feedback on conducting cognitive modeling and creating personas based on the data that will be collected.

Buchanan, Richard, and Victor Margolin. "Rhetoric, Humanism, and Design." *Discoversing Design*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995.

Buchanan posits that the subject matter of design is indeterminate but that its process and rhetoric is universal to all design disciplines. He also gives a comprehensive analysis of the different perspectives on the origins and applications of design.

Cooper, Alan. *About Face 3*. Indianapolis: Wiley Publishing, 2007.

Cooper explains the why's and how's of user-centered design. Chapter 5 addresses data collection for the assessment of personas—different "types" of people that use an interface.

Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1). "telluric." Random House, Inc. 16 Mar. 2008. <[Dictionary.com http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/telluric](http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/telluric)>.

Fetterman, David M. *Ethnography, Second Edition*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1998.

Chapter one introduces ethnographic theory and practice. Chapter discusses interviewing.

Goffman, Ervin. *Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*. Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959.

Goffman addresses the way we behave in social contexts and how others perceive this behavior. He uses the analogy of theatrical performance for the basis of his reasoning.

Hebdige, Dick. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. London: Routledge, 1979.

Hebdige applies Marxist, structuralist, and semiotic lenses to the analysis of the development of subcultures in relation to the emerging musical genres in Great Britain in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s.

Johnson, Steven. *Emergence: The Connected Lives of Ants, Bees, Cities, and Software*. New York: Scribner, 2001.

Johnson uses the swarm intelligence tendency of slime mold as a spring board for an inquiry into the self-organizing phenomena that occur in both nature and society.

Marris, Paul, and Sue Thomas. "Encoding/Decoding." *Stuart Hall. Media Studies: A Reader*.

Hall posits that communication occurs as a set of distinctive moments in which signs and symbols are encoded with meaning and at some point in the circuit decoded by the receiver to make sense of the message. Hall makes the reader aware that this process is never isolated, but is instead continually influenced by cultural, sociological, and ideological constructs. Thus no symbol has inherent meaning, but meaning is attributed to and derived from it by people within the context of their respective worldviews.

Monmonier, Mark. *Mapping It Out: Expository Cartography for the Humanities and Social Sciences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

Monmonier approaches the narrative aspects of map-making that can be employed by social scientists to supplement and augment their writing. Addresses using maps to represent both qualitative and quantitative social data visually and introduces graphic principles necessary to good map-making.

Morville, Peter. *Ambient Findability*. O'Reilly Media, 2005.

Morville posits that "findability" is the way to "bridge the divide between the sea of bits and the land of atoms." Chapter 2 discusses the history and importance of wayfinding and relates this natural process to the act of finding desired information in an information-saturated world.

Oftmann, Philip, Giles Revell, and Matt Willey. "Photofit: Self-Portraits." 2007.

"Photofit" is a collaborative project between a photographer and a designer in which participants assembled their facial identities with pieces from an actual photofit kit, designed by a mid-20th century French photographer and used by police beginning in the 1970s to create suspect identities. The resulting self-portraits had a narrative quality and made connections between participants' self-image.

Potts, Liza K. In-person discussion of project concept and media theory. February 2008.

Liza Potts is the Director of Human Factors at Electronic Ink in Philadelphia. She specializes in human-computer interaction, user experience architecture, and social software. Liza directed me in conducting my preliminary research.

Tufte, Edward. *Envisioning Information*. Cheshire, Connecticut: Graphics Press, 1990.

Tufte explains the different methods and approaches to visualizing information. The methods I will use will most likely be those that communicate ideas through "small multiples."