Staten Island Arts Folklife Project: Accessible Archive

Originally completed for Staten Island Arts' Folklife Project, by a group associated with Pratt Institute's School of Library and Information Science.

Staten Island is home to a rich mix of cultures and ethnicities, including arrivals recent and not so recent—Sri Lankan, Guyanese, Sudanese, Mexican, Irish, Italian, and many others. The Folklife Project of SIA (then called COHASI) had captured records of dance, storytelling, music, dress, and myriad other forms of expression in these immigrant communities. These digital files, mostly photo and video, were being hosted on public sites such as Flickr and Vimeo for lack of a dedicated repository.

CHALLENGE:

Create an organizational scheme for a collection of materials (photos, video, audio) documenting cultural activities on Staten Island, and design an interface to access this collection.

1. QUESTIONS

Who is this for?

Ideally, there would be three distinct levels of access. There would first need to be administrative/editorial access, for the Folklife staff to add and alter records. Additionally, the collection will be useful to folklorists and academics, who might want to be able to see more detailed metadata than is necessary for the general public.

At least some of the people who will want to access the contents of this collection, however, will be the people whose activities are documented in it—namely, members of immigrant communities who live on Staten Island—and those are the users with the most particular parameters. Therefore, they were the users on whom we focused.

How will they access it?

These users are likely to be less digitally sophisticated than application design usually assumes. They may not have access to computers or high-speed internet. The most probable tool for this audience to use to access the collection would be a smartphone.

Though business and social media have come to embrace the concept of "mobile first," anticipating that many if not most customers will use their phones to connect to the company's online presence, this is still not true of cultural institutions putting collections and archives on the Web. The expectation remains, with good reason, that a person who wants to study an artwork will do so from a desktop, not a phone. This collection is an exception to that general truth.

Do these users have expectations of a particular kind of digital interaction?

Ideally, we would have been able to canvass some of these users to find out which apps and sites they use the most and would be familiar with. We did not have this access, so our assumptions rest on common sense. We

would strongly recommend user testing before actually developing and deploying this iconography.

The only applications we can be reasonably sure that a smartphone user will be practiced with are the basic functions of the phone: calling, messaging, and taking photos. We can also only assume that these users are conversant with the stock iPhone or Android applications (and not both of those). We should build, therefore, from a base that comprises the common features of those limited applications.

What language/iconography will be familiar to these users?

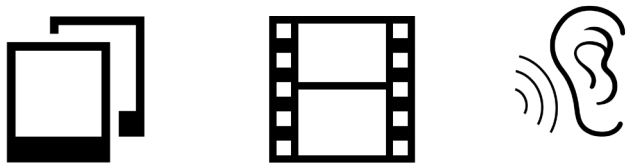
The groups represented in the SIA folk archives speak many different languages; English literacy is not a given. Translating the app into each represented language, and allowing the user to choose their language when opening it, would be an ideal solution, but probably impractical, given resource restraints. A heavily graphical, icon-based interface would be the next best option.

Depending on what programming language or CMS the developers use, a module or plugin that can translate some of the site (navigation, for example) into some languages might be available. That feature should inform the choice of platform, as should display and playback capabilities.

2. CHOOSING THE VISUAL LANGUAGE

The challenge, then, is to build an icon-based vocabulary that can be easily and quickly understood by many diverse people. Cultural symbolism may vary widely, but we can reasonably assume that these communities have absorbed the basic iconography of functioning within NYC (octagonal red=stop, for instance).

Some of the iconography of digital culture might be useful, but it should be relied on only to the point of basic phone interaction, and only as it functions in the context of phone usage. A camera icon, for instance, might indicate the action of taking a photo, not looking at a photo. Something like the hamburger icon, which is specific to Western digital interactions, would be useless.



Potential icons to indicate formats: photo, video, sound.

Our icon set should allow us to tag content with the type of content available (photo, video, audio), language/culture of origin, date of recording, place of recording, and people associated (presenter, originator, recorder). Other technical metadata (such as the type of equipment used, subject terms, and so forth) can be limited to administrative users and indicated with English. Titles can be shown as words no matter their language, though an English translation should accompany them where possible.

3. METADATA and ORGANIZATIONAL SCHEMA

for viewers of content

language/culture

country or countries: indicated whenever possible with flag
modifiers, such as specific ethnic group or region within country and/or non-standard (minority) language: written name, in character set of origin and English transliteration

content type
photo
video
audio

performance or object type
oral storytelling
dance
theater
music: singing
music: instrumental
painting
sculpture
textiles

recording information
date(s)
place
equipment
format (jpg, mp3, etc.)

people associated
presenter (singer, dancer, storyteller, etc.)
originator (author, composer, painter, weaver, etc.)
recorded by (collector)

for administrative/academic users

archival metadata
in English: Dublin Core, modified as needed
LOC subject terms

associated collection items
tags/links

associated and related items
(i.e., the collection has a photo of a painting: metadata for the painting itself exists here)
Dublin Core, modified as needed; additional information will include location, ownership of this item, rights and permissions.

4. DESIGN

Actions and workflows

Creating the archive from the ground up meant that we had the opportunity, and the responsibility, of tailoring the software to the exact needs of the community of users. To begin, therefore, we needed to define the actions that users would need to take, and actions that would be different at different levels of access.

The preliminary list of actions includes the following: choose language; browse; search; view information about Folklife Project (location, mission, history, staff); contact (inform, give feedback, volunteer, invite SIA to upcoming event); view event calendar; donate; follow link to parent organization.

Site visitor (without signing in):
Browse collection (including sort and filter)
Search collection
Access individual items: play, view, read
Create account

General user:
Basics of site membership: log in, recover password, set email preferences, and so forth.
Browse collection (including sort and filter)
Search collection
Access individual items: play, view, read
Add public comments and reactions
Send comments and information directly to administrators, Folklife staff
Save favorites
Send, share, post to social media

Academic:
Everything associated with general membership, plus access to full metadata records

Administrator:
Everything available to general and academic users, plus administrative actions such as adding, editing and deleting records; tagging; administering user accounts (granting access; communicating with, suspending, or deleting members)

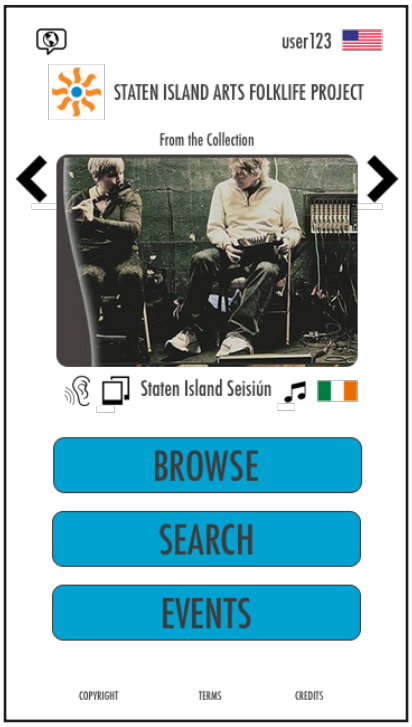
Navigation and structure
The workflows and list of actions gave us a clear map for the organization of the site and demonstrated how users would need to navigate. The metadata of the collection's items also define organizational categories and provide terms for filters.

The main navigational menu can be fairly simple: explore collection, about, events, sign up/log in. Browsing and searching must be robust and filtering must be sophisticated, allowing the application of multiple filters and the selection of multiple choices within each filter. (For example, a user should be able to choose both language and national origin, and within the latter, should be able to select both "Mexican" and "Guatemalan.")

Appearance/visual design
Visually, the project needed to conform to the main SIA/COHASI site and use its design parameters (fonts, colors). And, of course, the mobile app had to be the initial interface, not an afterthought to a desktop version.

The imperative of using iconography rather than relying on written language informed some aspects of the visual design. There needed to be room allotted to the icons as well as the associated words. The affordance by which the user can choose the language of the skeleton of the site needed a prominent place and an intuitive interaction.

Preliminary mobile wireframe of signed-in user's landing page. Features a random selection from the collection, with icons identifying format (photo and sound recording), discipline (music), and ethnic origin (Ireland).



SUMMARY

The app essentially determines its own logical structure, through a methodical analysis of the challenges posed by the user base and the actions the users will want to take. Language barriers, plus a probable deficit in digital sophistication, call for an icon-based interface; the steps to a user's access to an individual item in the collection tell us how the app should be constructed.

Tags and categories are almost as clearly indicated. An archive that represents many cultures needs to be organized and searchable by culture (and language). Likewise, there are a significant but finite number of artistic genres represented, which offers another organizing principle.

The entire process demonstrates how a groundwork of IA and UX work assists significantly in design and development.