

Illegible Semantics:

Exploring the Design Space of Metal Logos

Metal logos can be by turns gaudy, uncouth, or nearly illegible. Yet, these logos *work*: they communicate sophisticated notions of genre and emotional affect. But of course you already know that. So does everyone else who is intimately familiar with metal. But it has never been systematically investigated – certainly not from different perspectives at once – that metal logos may actually tell a story – even if it's not always immediately apparent. Well, not until now, that is.



Summary

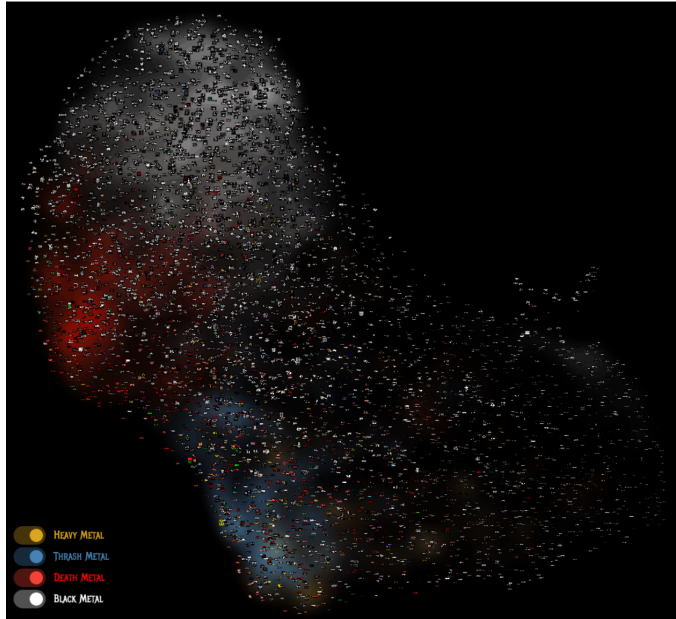
We, a group of researchers from Europe and the US and one designer, worked on a paper on metal logo design that was submitted to and accepted by alt.VIS, a workshop at IEEE VIS, the premier international forum for Visualization and Visual Analytics research.

The paper is called “Illegible Semantics: Exploring the Design Space of Metal Logos,” and as you can surmise from the title, it’s about metal logos and what information they encode and how.

What we did, and why we did, is best explained in the paper, but the short of it is that –

1. We worked on a framework, which we dubbed the “Dimensions of Doom” (DoD) to help characterize the ways that “illegible” band logos communicate information. To test and further develop this, our designer created almost 50 logos of the same word “VIS” in various genre-representative styles.





2. We developed a web tool based on machine learning that (1) allows the user to interactively explore a “cloud” of thousands of existing band logos that were scraped from the Metal Archives and (2) group them based on certain characteristics such as genre, color, and “image-likeness.”

The main thing is that we now have a framework and a tool to systematically understand the diversity and complexity of metal logo designs, and that may have implications for visualization research topics.

Impact

So what does this all mean for the average metalhead – or designers or artists? For starters, it validates what **metalheads** already know – that there is definitely more to designing metal logos than just making them as unreadable as possible, that there is indeed a visual language in the logos. For **designers**, our work offers reference tools that could potentially help them to see what’s already out there and to get a grip on a given (sub)genre’s specific rules and aesthetics. **Bands and artists** can use the web tool to see if their logo is congruent with the genre they play in – or if the logo is a genre outlier. For example: if you play Heavy Metal but you have what looks like a Death Metal according to neighboring logos in the ‘map of metal’ – well, maybe you send off the wrong signal. Unless that is what you want (we’re looking at you, Party Cannon!).

What’s next?

In the future, we plan to continue working to both extend, refine, and unify our DoD and the MetalVis web tool. Doing this should help us get a better understanding of how visual style creates meaning in band logos. To this end, more sample logos and additional interactive features and filter options will be added to the web tool. The DoD, too, are a work in progress and not yet set in stone. In fact, we already have some ideas for future improvements.

Conclusion

We see a potential that reaches beyond the metal community at large. Based on our preliminary study, we may already cautiously suggest that literal legibility – that is legibility understood in terms of clarity and efficiency – is not the be-all-end-all of textual information visualization, in contrast to most current thinking about visualization research and much visualization practice. Metal logo design is an interesting area that enables us to explore these “alt” perspectives on visualization.

Resources

- The paper's companion website, which contains a link to the MetalVis web tool and a tutorial on how to use it and more, can be found at: <http://www.illegiblesemantics.com/>
- The paper itself is freely available as a PDF via <https://arxiv.org/pdf/2109.01688.pdf>
- A comprehensive, tongue-in-cheek genre guide featuring close to 50 sample logos representing metal subgenres "vetted" by scene veterans can be found at: <http://www.tundratoucan.com/projects/proj-8/>
- This Twitter thread sums up the main findings of the paper: https://twitter.com/_Noeska_/status/1435540740940173317

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