

Scriptomania

In the digital age, the script font phenomenon obsolesces the look of letterpress

by **Nick Shinn** Imagine a world where everyone reads print set in nice serified type.

That world is shrinking in the rear view mirror. People read less, they read online, and serified faces are declining in popularity. In print advertising, headlines that look like letterpress are out of vogue, with faux-effect lettering copping the top awards.

Reflecting market demand, online font retailer Veer recently produced two type specimen booklets: one dedicated to scripts, and the other to New Fonts, including scripts. Scripts are also big sellers at mass market distributors Fonts.com and MyFonts.com, where half the top ten are sans serif and half are scripts. Serified fonts sell poorly.

No mere fad, the vogue for script fonts represents a populist expression of digital culture, rumpling the stiff formality of mainstream, print-derived typography in legacy and new media.



SCRAPBOOK BY RONNA PENNER OF TYPADÉLIC,
USING ESCRITA (T-26) AND GARAMOUCHE (P-22) FONTS

Call it reality design.

It must be stated that all digital fonts (with the exception of a few by LettError)—no matter how mechanistic in appearance—are composed of hand-made characters, the labour of designers manipulating a mouse or stylus. The difference with scripts is that their letters are (or resemble) writing or rendering which is freehand, made without copy-and-paste, and without orthographic tools such as rulers, templates, french curves, and compasses, or their software equivalents. High-touch for the high tech era.

Within this definition lies a vast range of motives and uses, concepts and executions. Here are some of the genres, with representative typefaces.

COLLECTIBLES

Hucklebuck

Jason Walcott, Jukebox

“...They [collectors] love scripts and will grab pretty much anything that is a new release,” says Veer’s Grant Hutchinson. Veer loved Jason Walcott’s foundry, Jukebox, so much that they bought the company. Meanwhile, my own next release through ShinnType will be a script...

INTERNET

Comic Sans

by Vincent Connare for Microsoft (Chalkboard is Apple’s rip-off). Just-plain-folksiness finds its epitome in Comic Sans. Made ubiquitous by free distribution with IE as a Microsoft Core TrueType Web Font, Comic Sans, clear and legible on screen thanks to its careful hinting, is the perfect voice to say, This ain’t no slick con job. Of course, it is detested by typophiles to the extent of inspiring the hilarious www.ban-comicsans.com.

FAMOUS PERSON’S HANDWRITING

Duchamp

The face that launched Richard Kegler’s P-22, derived from the hand of Marcel Duchamp.

Goo Goo G’Soob

Andrew Smith’s appropriation of John Lennon’s handwriting references the Beatle’s work as poet and visual artist.

Houston Pen

Brian Willson’s digitization of the handwriting of famous Texan Sam Houston appeals to many, including Civil War re-enactors.

AND NOT QUITE SO FAMOUS

Your own writing

At www.fontifier.com, you can get your own handwriting turned into a font for an astonishing US\$9!

SCRAPBOOKING

Schlub

Ronna Penner, Typadelic

Never mind not using classic typefaces—even fonts representing a formal writing style don’t look right for the true amateur; the desired look is deliberately hand-made. At the same time, it would be a mistake to dismiss the scrapbooker as naive. Font Diner’s Stuart Sandler observes, “There is a hungry market in competition with itself to create more sophisticated scrapbook pages... the audience that’s buying fonts is indeed looking for something nobody else has.”

Which is exactly what a foundry specializing in contemporary scripts such as Ronna Penner’s Typadelic Fonts has to offer (check out <http://www.typadelic.com/scrapbooking.html>). The lively invention and variety of her faces demonstrates the appeal of digital scripts over the more regimented, serious scripts of previous technologies.

In the preceding categories, many of these fonts are purchased by prosumers for personal use, and the consequent pervasive presence of script fonts within democratized graphic design, used by non-professionals, is one of the major forces which are casualizing typography.

It is also true that the quality of professional typography has been diluted by the advent of desktop publishing. Adobe Systems estimates that between the introduction of PostScript in 1985 and the millennium, the number of professional graphic artists and designers increased by a factor of 24, from 250,000 to 6 million.

So not only has the task of typography been entirely removed from the hands of specialist type houses, it has been delivered over to a profession in which the vast majority are vertical invaders who have had little opportunity to absorb the legacy of typographic lore from the few survivors of the old school.

In this context, the subtle distinctions in meaning that, over the past century, have become attached to slight differences in traditional type forms have lost their relevance. Who cares about the difference between a transitional and a didone? They’re both serif genres, and serifs are so default.

If the old nuances are not recognized, not pursued and exploited, then the old faces, set plain, are too dull to compete with the vivid personality of such fonts as Ms Penner’s.

CUSTOM



Jill Bell is the boss (www.jillbell.com). Jill Bell is Norah Jones.

RETAILING

Mister Television

Stuart Sandler, Font Diner

In both packaging and advertising, retail is full of scripts. This is particularly true for packaged foods, where the naturalness of scripts disguises the unappealing factory-processed quality of the product. In retail advertising, the panache of classic commercial signwriter scripts creates instant buzz, and their gestural retro styling suggests a one-off in a friendly mom-and-pop store, not the slick merchandising of a megacorp. In the U.S., the largest market for fonts, House Industries’ script faces have captured the imagination of a youthful design profession whose nostalgia is not beholden to typographic tradition, but turns instead to retro commercial pop culture. This is the professional push for script fonts that complements the prosumer’s pull. Because scripts don’t have large families of stylistic variants, House and Font Diner sell them in thematic packages, such as the charmingly named “Casino Buffet” from FD.

POST-MODERN PLAYS

Although scripts, so resolutely hand-made, are resistant to mind games, there are a few script fonts that employ the conceptual rigour and novelty usually reserved for “type” forms.

Ferox

Blackletter by Miles Newlyn, inspired by Eyvind Earle’s work at Disney as a background painter for such animated films as *Sleeping Beauty*, but constructed with geometric elements, in particular ellipses.

Zarzipar

Gabor Kothay’s spectacular mash-up is a “hand-drawn italic” which veers between orthodox typographic features and fanciful distortions and flourishes. Comes complete

with its own wordmark-glyph name [type “Z” in Alternates font].

Aranea

This is what happens when you spend several centuries too long in a coffin without trimming your nails. Verena Gerlach lavishes the amount of detail historically applied to decorated initials to a quite different purpose.

THIS POINT IN TIME

The cultural task emerging: to think beyond the many centuries of Western typographic evolution, which started from the basis of the “scrittura umanistica” and developed into a complex system of meanings for printed typography—and come up with a more sophisticated “typography from writing” for script fonts.

Change is overdue, because the print typographic model, despite having been transferred to the Internet, is an anachronism. Based on the writing of a literate elite of 15th century Florentine scholars, it was derived at a time when few could read and then refined further. It was practised for five centuries by a tradition of skilled specialists.

In contrast, digital typography comes into being in an era where literacy is universal, and everyone with a computer is a typesetter. The media is commercial, mass and diverse, so commercial sign-lettering is a significant force, as are personal scribbles—while the letterpress tradition is bleeding meaning. Digital fonts do a so much better job of mimicking handwriting/lettering than the previously dominant technologies of metal and phototype.

John Hudson puts it in perspective:

“There is no logical reason why digital typographic technology should be based on a metal type paradigm (whether handset or mechanical); the fact that [it is], is due to historical exigency—it is easier to [re]model an existing technology than to invent new

ways of doing things in a new technology, especially when existing companies have a massive collection of design and metrics data that they want to leverage. But when the paradigm of the existing technology is based on the properties of a particular material—in this case, metal—does it really make sense to carry that paradigm over to a new technology from which that material is absent? Historical exigency is important in understanding why things are the way they are, but it should not be accepted as the way things must be, let alone as the best way things can be.” (Typophile.com post, “transitions from metal to digital”, May 6, 2004)

“What new paradigms can we create that take into account the specific material (bits and bytes) of digital typography?” asks Hudson.

There are two new paradigms that have emerged: complexity and mutability.

Caflich

Thematic

Plain setting.

Thematic

OpenType setting.

Only “m” and “a” are standard glyphs: the rest are contextual alternates, determined by their adjacent characters.

Modelled on the hand of mid-20th century typographer Max Caflich by Robert Slimbach in 1993, and adapted to OpenType in 2001.

The new OpenType format accommodates vast numbers of contextual alternates,

enabling the “fontification” of (a) languages that have traditionally not been type-friendly, and (b) the messy humanity of script, i.e. its complexity and irregularity. In Caflich, Slimbach’s ingenious arrangement of alternate letter forms is used to simulate the classic “joining rules” of a fine script.

If Hudson has given a reason why digital types need not follow the forms of legacy media, Slimbach has shown how they may differ. And Sandler explains why they will differ, with the appeal of scripts:

“People want that... The script look is very human, very organic and relatable, and even a few letters sitting next to a very plain sans will reveal an even more potent wow! People connect with scripts faster and they evoke mood perhaps faster and more pointedly than any of the subsets of display typography.”

MUTABLE TYPE OF THE FUTURE

Just as many have turned their backs on the letterpress look, favoring the organic quality of scripts, so, too, the digital dynamic has evolved from Space Invaders to Counter Strike—from flat, clunky metaphors to smooth, dimensional, real-time simulation.

The parallel trend in font technics is mutability—fonts that are not composed of pre-determined glyphs, but of letterforms that are subject to fundamental change during the typesetting process. It’s a marginal trend at best, but one worth keeping an eye on as it heads toward flexible, streaming, interactive typography, as individual as the reader.

Imagine panoptic feedback systems which monitor saccadic eye motions, analyze reader biometrics and behavior, and adjust the text accordingly. Scary, like Minority Report, but with Google ads—which respond to keywords in live text with purchase opportunities—we’re on our way.

Crucial to mutability is the concept of

the metafont, defined by computer guru Donald E. Knuth in 1980, wherein a range of sizes and styles are created from a common set of character outlines by modification of dimensional parameters. Knuth’s showpiece was a setting of the psalm The Lord is My Shepherd, with the typeface morphing from sans to serif, letter by letter.

LettError’s Beowulf (1989) modified PostScript font outlines with a randomization routine, so that its letters never set the same way twice.

Multiple Master fonts (discontinued by Adobe in 1999) were a limited commercial application of the metafont principle, allowing typographers to use sliders to incrementally vary certain parameters (i.e. “axes”) of a typeface, such as weight and horizontal scaling.

LettError’s “Twin” typeface, while not a true metafont, introduced the idea that the sliders controlling glyph alternates may be fed by a data stream, varying the appearance according to the weather, for instance. To get a better understanding of how this works, go to <http://design.umn.edu/go/project/TCDC03.1.TTC>, and “test drive” the new Twin (for “Twin Cities”) font.

It’s not readily apparent how the organic look of script fonts will eventually converge with the bio-mimetic trend in software development, but it seems like a natural destiny.

FONT AVAILABILITY

Caflich Script Pro: www.adobe.com

Mister Television: www.fontdiner.com

Duchamp: not commercially available

Aranea, Ferox, Goo Goo Gjoob,

Hucklebuck, Zanzibar: www.veer.com

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