text talk

ONLINE TYPE FORUMS EMERGE AS BEACONS OF TYPOGRAPHY

by Nick Shinn

How does one stay up-to-date on typography?

It would be nice if there were a regular trade magazine covering type business and technology, reviewing new typefaces, type books, font management tools, and software applications, with features on type issues, typographers and design projects (for instance, publication redesigns). But there isn't, and it ain't gonna happen—the marketing dollars that could support such a venture are too few and far between.

Some foundries and font distributors have put out their own publications, such as Émigré magazine and FontShop Benelux's Druk. The Society of News Design has a member magazine with strong type coverage.

There are annual special issues of How and Eye devoted to typography, and the occasional article in graphic design magazines such as this—but I don't always write about type.

If you need a frequent type fix, you have to go online.

CreativePro.com is a good news source, with press releases and frequent feature articles by writers such as John D. Berry, who used to edit ITC's U&lc magazine when it was still in print.

Microsoft.com/typography has featured Simon Daniel's "Links News and Contacts" for the past five years. Plain of name and appearance it may be, but it is the most central hub of relevant type news—lots of it, and always fresh.

Now to the main item.

TYPE BLOGS AND ONLINE FORUMS

While there have been online discussion sites since way back, the present era begins with the mushrooming of the blog (i.e. web log) phenomenon in 1999, powered by do-it-yourself tools Blogger, Pitas, and Groksoup. Andy Crewdson's legendary type blog Lines and Splines (2000-2002) followed the basic web log pattern—a journal of personal observations, with links in the text. Not only was the content sharp, but the site had proper old-school minimalist typography, dammit, achieved by giving ample linespace (thanks to CSS) to the newly released Georgia, a typeface in the classic tradition, tailored to monitor resolution by the impeccable Matthew Carter. Instant cred.

Also in 2000, Joseph Pemberton and Jared Benson of Punchcut launched Typophile (*www.typophile.com*) as a resource-centred site, with a handful of essays, interviews, and book listings (librarian: Tiffany Wardle). The library has grown, but the biggest growth has been in the proliferation of discussion forums. Typophile now has over a dozen active categories, with several "threads" or discussions going on in most of them; a popular topic may grow to a hundred posts in only a few days, and all threads are archived.

At Typophile, everything is under discussion from font management tools to software piracy. It is also the only online design forum where users can post work-in-progress (logos, wordmarks, typefaces) for peer critique. Need a font identified?—there's a forum for that, too.

The other major type discussion site is Typographica, founded by Joshua Lurie-Terrell in May 2002 and manned by Stephen Coles. I first started going there because I thought it was a Canadian site—the URL is *www.typographi.ca*. Cute.

A comparison between Typographica and Typophile reveals subtle differences.

Typophile is a complex of forums, whereas Typographica is primarily a journal in blog form that allows multiple authors. Four or five current threads are posted in Typographica's main column, and new threads are instantly prominent on the home page. Each thread is introduced in the first paragraph (usually including a link or two, and sometimes a GIF) of a short article by a contributing writer—the rest accessed by a "read the rest" link.

(above) At online type forum TYPOPHILE, participants employ a wide variety of portraits, pictures and icons to identify themselves.

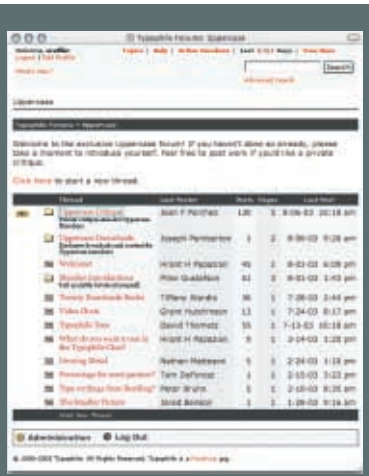
Comments are invited, and off it goes, wherever the authors/commentors take it.

The site is built on the subjective opinions of its writers, who are in a sense columnists, or instigators of multiple-author columns. The choice of topics is dependent on the writers. With the ample space available for them to stimulate profound analysis, combined (a la Crewdson) with the sophisticated typographic elegance of an openly leaded, mutely-hued Georgia, one would expect a refined exchange of ideas. But that's not always the case. Threads can get ugly in a hurry, as when one writer recommended a new online font publisher, and several respondents engaged in a heated criticism of the plagiarized designs in its catalog; the publisher closed its website a couple of days later. Monthly visits: c.150,000.

At TYPOPHILE, anyone can start a thread on anything, with a comment as simple as "What Bodoni?" On both sites, talk can become absurdly technical, or broadly hilarious, as in the discussion, "What if God had a font?" where God decided to chime in and was asked by Sean-Michael Chavez, "If someone designs a font, but it never gets used, does it exist?", to which He replied, "If someone uses a font but it was never designed…it must be Arial."

Despite the similarities that occur in their threads once they get going, both becoming discussions, it's apparent that TYPOGRAPHICA is a journal descended from the personal blog, and TYPOPHILE is a forum, descended from the discussion group.

These Typo- sites are not presently income-generating businesses. Nor were they initiated with that in mind. They are labours of love. With its simple site structure and free weblog publishing system (by Movable Type), TYPOGRAPHICA's costs are covered by Matthew Bardram's Atomic Media Pixel Fonts, a foundry which hosts it in return for a small (but prominent) banner ad. Writers aren't paid for their pieces. The rotating art gallery of around 100 "bloggtopper" large banners is provided free-of-charge by contributors in return for a mouse-over link.



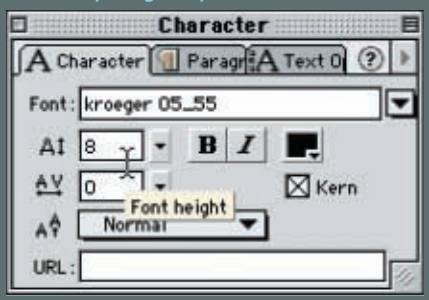
Despite the similarities that occur in their threads once they get going, it's apparent that TYPOGRAPHICA (right) is a journal descended from the personal blog, and TYPOPHILE (left) is a forum, descended from the discussion group.

ANTI-ALIASING: JUST SAY NO

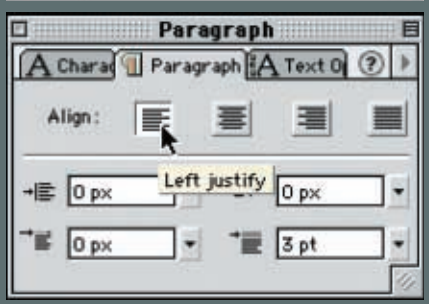
Stop rubbing your eyes. It's OS X, the type is supposed to be blurry. Huh? Don't like that? Well, break out the pixel fonts!

HOW TO USE BITMAP FONTS IN FLASH

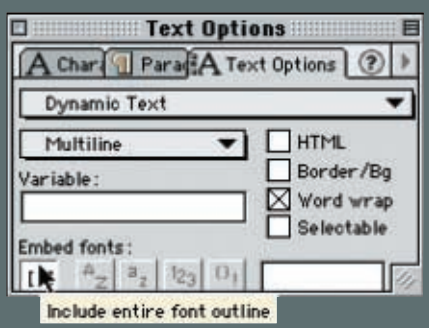
In Fireworks and Photoshop, you can turn off the anti-aliasing and give any font the jaggies. In Flash, use a specially designed pixel-font at 8 pt size to keep things crisp—here's how:



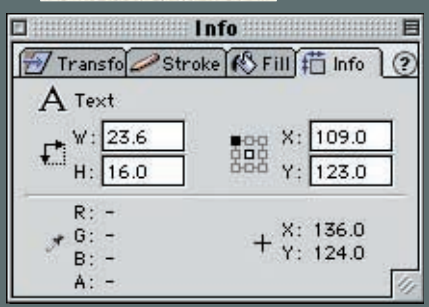
1. Make a text field, select font, and set type size to 8 pts in the Character panel (Flash 5). In Flash MX these settings are in the Text properties panel.



2. Use the flush left setting.



3. In Text Options (Flash 5) embed the entire font; in MX, embed a subset in Character Options—there are problems with some characters, such as the Euro and quote marks.



4. In the Info panel (Flash 5) or the Text properties panel (MX), set the text box to align in full pixels; your x and y co-ordinates should contain no decimals.

MISCELLANEOUS TIPS

- **In Flash MX, do not leave line spacing at the default 2 pts—this will result in a missing line of pixels on top of the characters. Set it to 4 or more.**
- **Publishing a movie in Flash MX: make sure that "Dimension" is set to "Match Movie", and "Scale" is set to "Exact Fit". Also choose "Low Quality" [?!] to turn off anti-aliasing.**

With its more open format and larger community (monthly visits: 250,000), TYPOPHILE requires more bandwidth. There is also a fee for its forum software. The bills are higher, and although it is not presently a for-profit venture, it has a strategy for continued funding to ensure its existence past the time when the keen attention of its creators begins to wane. This TYPOPHILE achieves by way of sponsorship and banner advertising, and selling membership in restricted-access discussion groups. Ah, the black arts…

BAROQUE PIXELIZATION

SPEAK UP (*www.underconsideration.com/speakup*) is a graphic design forum started in 2002 by the outspoken Chicago designer Armin Vit to air his opinions. Like TYPOGRAPHICA, it is powered by Movable Type and features a stable of authors, and like TYPOPHILE, it offers a selection of forums (although not as many), with frequent typographic topics. Like both, it is no moneymaker. What distinguishes SPEAK UP—not just here, but anywhere on the Net—is the stunning graphic quality of Vit's design. To those who say that fine typography is not possible on the web—least of all with live HTML text—check *www.underconsideration.com/speakup_v2/interviews/heller.html*.

Rather than trying to hide the jagged pixel in a fog of aliasing, SPEAK UP makes a virtue of it. "Crisper. Sharper. Added Bitmapness," it proclaims in the pseudo-italic of Underware's brilliant pixel font, Unibody. The elaborate typography of SPEAK UP is contained in a ruled grid that also holds bars and fields enlivened by baroque motifs and patterns—all executed pixel-by-pixel with the flat-patterned precision of a traditional Granjon or Bodoni ornament. Additional icons are by Vit's Toronto collaborator, Christopher May.

SPEAK UP is struggling with its success. Big traffic boosts the bandwidth bill, and as a result, appeals for financial support occasionally interrupt the content, much like a public TV fundraiser. TYPOPHILE's financial strategy, as befits the oldest site mentioned here, is somewhat more advanced; just how far it will develop remains to be seen.

It is quite possible that the blog and the forum will become commercialized in a way that differs significantly from the discussion groups located at large consumer websites like eBay or corporate type sites like Adobe or MyFonts, which are almost exclusively tech-help forums.

For the blog/forum to evolve, it will have to accommodate commercial interest without compromising the lively personal quality of discussions. More of those professionals who surf these

PIXEL FONT SOURCES

Here are two foundries that specialize in pixel fonts:
www.miniml.com
http://atomicmedia.net

Underware has the Unibody font:
www.underware.nl/site2

Armin Vit's SPEAK UP website (www.underconsideration.com/speakup) features a sophisticated combination of intricate HTML typography and baroque pixelization.

sites without joining in the community will have to take the plunge. That's not without difficulty; the tendency for business is to measure and control its utterances in vehicles like press releases and carefully written corporate communications. You can't do that here—it takes too long to write that kind of safe statement—and sooner or later you will have to contend with having your work criticized, or end up saying something regrettable about someone else's. There is an art to online discussion—it can be honed by practice. And there is a growing role for this phenomenon in the business of graphic design and typography.

Speaking of phenomena, mention must be made of Hrant H. Papazian, blogger extraordinaire, a seemingly ubiquitous presence in just about every typographic thread in existence. A funny thing these online communities, garnered from around the globe by slick technology, driven by the play of manners and personality. Who knows where it all leads?

Tips compiled with information from Craig Kroeger at www.Miniml.com and the Underware site at www.underware.nl/site2/index.php3?id1=unibody& id2=usinginflash. Nick Shinn is a Toronto art director and type designer whose work may be found online at www.shinntype.com.

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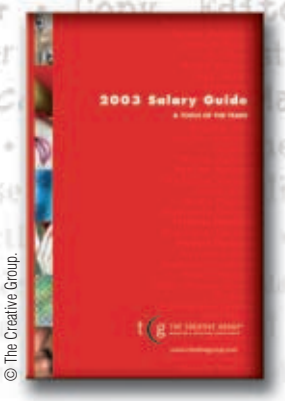

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