

Power struggles

Controlling a font of information

“When push comes to shove, we’re all control freaks.” Adam Engst, author of the best-selling *Internet Starter Kit* books, made this statement in a crowded hall at the first Adobe Internet Conference last year. Al-

though he was speaking about the ins and outs of setting up Web servers, I think his words can just as easily be applied to Web design (or any design field, for that matter).

I know it sounds megalomaniacal, but control is essential in good design. It helps guide (or even lead) visitors through important areas of a site, such as “What’s New” or



“Registration” pages. For example, designers can establish mood by controlling a page’s background colors (black? yellow? psychedelic images?). And, as modern Web browsers have evolved, we’ve been given more control over other aspects of our pages’ appearance. However, one area where designers have been (grudgingly) forced to relinquish control is typography.

But before I start sounding like a digital Machiavelli, we need to take a few steps back and look at why typographic control wasn’t a big deal on the Web. Then we can discuss why megalomania will win out in the end.

Power to the people

The creators of early Web browsers weren’t thinking about specifying fonts in HTML. Why would they be? They had more important things to do, such as incorporate images with text, then package it all in a spiffy markup language that could be accessed from any computer platform anywhere in the world.

Undoubtedly, some of those researchers got pretty darned sick of reading 10-point Times on a computer screen, so they built in users’ ability to

specify which fonts and sizes would appear when they were using either proportional fonts (typefaces with varying letter widths, such as Times) or fixed fonts (typefaces with equal letter widths, such as Courier). We can still do this from the Fonts tab in the General Preferences dialog box (Netscape Navigator), or the Font tab in the Options dialog box (Microsoft Internet Explorer).

Because of the way the Web was developed, everything was nice and open and friendly, with Web page creators and users working together in perfect harmony. Unfortunately, though, everything also looked pretty similar and boring.

When designers started getting their hands on the Web, they realized that they had lost the ability to specify fonts for their readers. To get around this problem, they created font-specific type as blocks of images in programs like Photoshop.

This was a pretty good workaround, since in most cases images of text have small file sizes, but it still presented a problem: Web browsers were forced to make several server requests to grab the images, which slowed down

loading speed. Plain text information, on the other hand, still screams quickly through the Net.

Power to the people who always wear black

With the current versions of Navigator and Explorer, designers can specify which typefaces display on a Web page using the tag, like this:

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<FONT FACE="ARIAL,HELVETICA">Megalomania is good ... because I say so.</font>
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The concept is pretty simple—tell the browser which font to use—but there are a few things you should take into consideration. If you've worked with fonts before, you know that there are different default fonts for each operating system, which is why I've specified two fonts in the HTML above, separated by a comma; Arial is the default for Windows-based machines, while Helvetica is the default for those that are Mac-based.

Navigator and Explorer query your machine's operating system (where the font information is stored) for the first font, and if they don't find it, will

move on down the list until they find a match. As long as you specify fonts that are roughly equivalent between the Windows and Mac operating systems, you can guarantee that the message will appear in similar fonts across the two platforms. Based on my informal testing methods, I wasn't able to reach a limit of how many list items you can include—even after ploughing through 30-plus font names like “yfdsja” and “uiomawe” (my testing methods can be rigorous), the browsers picked up Helvetica at the end of the list.

A great benefit of the approach is that you can specify any font and it will appear on your Web page as long as the font is present in the user's system. If it isn't, the browser will revert to the default font settings stored in the browsers' Preferences dialog boxes. A downside to this tactic is that not everyone has your fonts, so you may be stuck with the Windows and Mac OS standard font sets.

Power to the lawyers

Some Web sites that are beginning to specify fonts are making their fonts

available for viewers to download, so the pages will be seen as they were intended to be seen. This presents a problem, however, if you want to include copyrighted fonts, such as Isadora or Utopia, on your pages. Making commercial typefaces available on your site is a clear violation of copyright law. Although you could probably ask that your viewers purchase the fonts required to see your page, most likely that will drive them away from your site faster than a 10-MB movie download.



Power to the typographers

Better options are starting to emerge. Last year, Adobe and Microsoft announced OpenType, a new font technology that incorporates PostScript Type 1 and TrueType fonts into a unified format. Rather than fighting with different font formats as we've had to do in the past (something that's especially frustrating in cross-platform environments), there will be one format that "just works," according to the OpenType Initiative FAQ.

For designers (both in print and online), this means more control when

specifying fonts, so you will know that the fonts you're using will appear on any screen that views them. For users, the OpenType format promises to be fast and flexible. If you haven't installed the required fonts in your system, they will be downloaded automatically for display in your browser. To stem the bandwidth-eating tide of font transfers, the engineers working on OpenType have created a Compact Font Format (CFF) that encompasses the same information in about half the space. With other modifications to the technology, it will be possible to send only the characters that will be displayed—such as headlines or short directional aids.

Currently, Microsoft and font creator Monotype are offering a set of free “Web Fonts” on Microsoft’s Typography site that have been optimized for on-screen viewing through a process called *hinting*. Essentially, this means that the bitmap versions of the font (what gets displayed on screen) have been set up so that the pixels more accurately reflect the outlines of the font (what gets sent to a printer), rather than relying on the system to make that determination. In general, this makes for more readable typefaces on screen.

Power to the megalomaniacs

The ability to specify fonts offers designers more control over their Web pages, which ideally translates into better design, which in turn makes for better communication between a Web site and its audience. Powerful stuff, but, in my opinion, necessary amid the ever-growing Web's white noise. 🍷

URLs

Adobe Type

www.adobe.com/type/main.html

Microsoft Typography

www.microsoft.com/truetype/content.htm

OpenType Initiative

www.microsoft.com/truetype/fontpack/opentype.htm

Monotype

www.monotype.com/

Internet Starter Kit

www.tidbits.com/iskm/default.html

adobe.mag

◀ HOME

◀ DEPARTMENTS

◀ FEATURES

◀ adobe.com