

Web Watcher

BY GLENN FLEISHMAN



Nearly My Type

FOR TYPOGRAPHERS, THE WEB WAS and still is a bummer: so much text, so little control.

Although certain technical advances have given designers a modicum of typographic choice, the browser has retained a fairly firm grip on what typefaces display. But the tide is about to turn.

The release of new tools and the growth of standards to embed PostScript and TrueType fonts directly into a Web page will mean that a user need perform no special font installation in order to see a page the way the designer intended.

Until recently, the best that a Web designer could do to specify typefaces was to list a set of fonts in the order in which he or she preferred them to display (such “fontsets”

have been supported by browsers since 1996). But this certainly has a major drawback—there’s no guarantee that the users will have any of these typefaces installed. For more information, see “From Chaos to Control,” page 55.

To work around this, designers often render type into images, typically in Adobe Photoshop (and often using Extensis’s PhotoType plugin), to get exactly what they want. Rendered type doesn’t change display from browser to browser, but it requires extra software and additional cost and management.

What many designers would prefer is to be able to embed fonts into Web pages—this would provide editable and indexable text, easy updating, crisp display, and better performance (the font, or a subset of it, can be downloaded once and then cached for reuse).

Two competing font-embedding standards took the field about two years ago. Microsoft and Adobe Systems back OpenType, a wide-ranging evolution of PostScript and TrueType fonts into a new method of embedding, rendering, and displaying fonts in print, in electronic documents, and online. Meanwhile, Netscape partnered with Bitstream, a major font foundry, to back TrueDoc, which isn’t quite as ambitious in its scope as is OpenType.

Both formats allow TrueType and Type 1 PostScript fonts to be packaged into new formats that browsers can download and use to

render on screen. So far, OpenType for the Web is compatible only with Internet Explorer 4.0 and later (for Windows and Macintosh), while TrueDoc works with Netscape Navigator 4.0 and later (Windows and Mac) as well as IE 4.0 for Windows.

In recent months, both camps have released tools to make it easier to create the embedded font formats. Microsoft released the Windows-only Web Embedding Fonts Tool (WEFT) 2.0 for free; Bitstream released WebFont Wizard for Windows for about \$200. HexMac also offers TrueDoc embedding software for Windows and Mac.

All of these utilities allow you to create single files or sets of files that can have full fonts or just subsets of characters. WEFT can analyze a Web site and create an exact subset for a single page or the whole site. WebFont Wizard requires you to specify which characters you want in a subset.

OpenType works with cascading style sheets (CSS), a standard that allows designers to set page-specific and global styles for text display. TrueDoc, as supported in the next release of Netscape Navigator, will also be compatible with CSS. If you’re especially clever, even with current 4.0 browsers you can insert code for both TrueDoc and OpenType fonts in the same Web page and get a font to display regardless of platform and browser. But it often requires a little JavaScript.

The release of new font-embedding tools and the growing support for CSS with embedded fonts gives real hope for real type on the Web—even if it does require at least a bit of HTML hand-coding. ♦

Glenn Fleishman is a contributing editor and columnist for Adobe Magazine. His Web site is at www.glenns.org; you can reach him via e-mail at glenn@glenns.org.

Articles and sites of interest

www.adobe.com/type/opentype/qna.html

Adobe’s Q&A on OpenType

www.microsoft.com/typography/users.htm

Microsoft on OpenType

www.truedoc.com/webpages/intro/index.html

Bitstream’s TrueDoc site

www.hexmac.com

HexMac’s Macintosh TrueDoc tool

http://developer1.netscape.com:80/viewsource/goodman_fonts.html

Danny Goodman’s advice on using TrueDoc fonts

www.will-harris.com

Wise words from digital type’s iconoclast and guru, Daniel Will-Harris