

What type now?

In light of the rapid proliferation of typeface design in the digital era, what conceptual space provides impetus to the designer wishing to create a new typeface design? This paper will illustrate the creative process in the making of an individual type design. It will attempt to locate this process in the technical and semantic framework of current typographic debate.

The paper documents the development of a typeface design and discusses the questions: Can a contemporary, digitally rendered sans-serif be imbued with some of the rhythmic and human visual qualities detected in handwriting? What are the evaluation mechanisms?

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INTRODUCTION.

There has been a marked proliferation of typeface designs since the introduction of desktop font design software in the late 1980's. This is paralleled by a radical change in the industrial context for typeface design and the distribution of expertise from a small number of large corporations to a larger number of varied stakeholders [7]. Questions about the creative, professional, commercial and semantic aspects of type design offer opportunities for design research.

It is common for graphic design practitioners to use a limited range of trusted font designs with flexibility and invention. However they also look to new font designs as a way of introducing innovation into their communication design. For some graphic designers there will be an inevitable impulse to design their own typefaces. What is the result of that impulse? Anthony Cahalan estimates the number of typefaces available in the last 30 years has grown from 1,500 to 60,000 [2]. Although many of these typefaces are limited in their application, there has, by any standard, been a phenomenal growth in choice. A large number of these would be traditionally classified as display fonts. They have overt visual characteristics that typically lend themselves to limited text applications such as headlines or signs.

Since the late 1980s, and what Mathew Carter refers to as the democratisation of typography [1] there has been an explosion in the availability of fonts. Many of these fonts have been the result of the boundless opportunities for digital intervention of the visual font data. These type designs can be widely and cheaply distributed in electronic form enabling rapid changes in graphic fashion. Cahalan suggests that font useage has become a chronometer of graphic design [3], and argues that the distinctive characteristics that drove the popularity of some new fonts often led to their saturation useage and subsequent association with a specific period of time and eventual disappearance from wide-scale employment. As an example Cahalan provides Dead History as a post modern design that may not be widely used again perhaps until such time as a 1990's retro revival should occur.

Digital type founding has greatly increased access for the individual practitioner or small collective to introduce typographic innovations [8]. The process of working on my own typeface design has provided the context for me to consider the creative process that drove the initial design and to consider the semantic framework that provides mechanisms for evaluation.

Design parameters

I have two requirements for this typeface design, the first is that it is useful for setting text and second that it connotes the semantic qualities I intended. Text fonts, demand that the design process takes into careful account the proportion of the letter forms, the visual relationship between upper and lower cases so that basic standards of readability as opposed to legibility are achieved [2]. Stanley Morrison, prominent twentieth century type designer stated that for a font to be successful few should recognise its novelty. This apparent desire for anonymity is a useful gauge of the

effectiveness of the design and goes some way to explaining some of the value judgements worth researching within the typographic/graphic design community.

Inspiration for a type design varies considerably. Matthew Carter's design of Verdana for Microsoft in the 1990s is a case study in typeface design in response to a specific technical challenge – readability on computer screen [5]. Martin Majoor's Telefont, was created to meet the demanding requirements of a telephone directory for the Dutch PTT [10]. Designers such as New Yorker Jonathan Hoefler are known for integrating a keen sense of typographic history with modern digital possibilities [5].

Initial concepts and inspirations

As part of my initial ideas/concepts generation I developed letter forms that drew inspiration from examples of handwriting I had begun to collect. These examples were from people who had been taught handwriting in the mid 20th century. These handwriting samples had characteristics which indicated a strong rhythmic quality and purposeful dynamic created by the angle of stress. In addition the consistency, and neatness, that could be sustained over the duration of a lengthy piece of writing seemed to possess an almost mechanical quality (see Figure 2).

The quick brown fox jumps
over the lazy dog.

Bonnie Jean on her

Figure 2.

This ability seemed to me to be no longer discernible in the word processor generation. It was not my intention to try and reproduce a hand writing style font. (There are numerous examples of freely available fonts based on an individuals handwriting that has been scanned and turned into a digital alphabet)

Many of these qualities I found appealing existed in italic serif font designs typefaces such as Garamond italic. But I was interested in attempting to marry the concepts of rhythm and forward dynamic to the geometric modernist form of an upright sans serif.

Design process

Initial sketches were driven by an attempt to capture the energy and rhythm created by the diagonal strokes of the handwriting examples without the need to resort to an italic form. In addition I wanted the type face to be sans serif as I felt that the juxtaposition of the cursive elements with the machine aesthetic implied by sans serif could yield an unfamiliar but workable outcome. The design impulse to integrate hand written characteristics into communication design is chronicled by Heller and Ilic using examples that have all but abandoned formal machine created typographic rules [6] and as Lupton states "Typefaces grew ever more abstract and formalized, distanced from the liquid hand. Today, designers look back at the systematic, abstracting tendencies of modern letter design and both celebrate and challenge that rationalizing impulse." [9]. My intention was to seek some reconciliation of human and the fluid with the machine and the abstract.

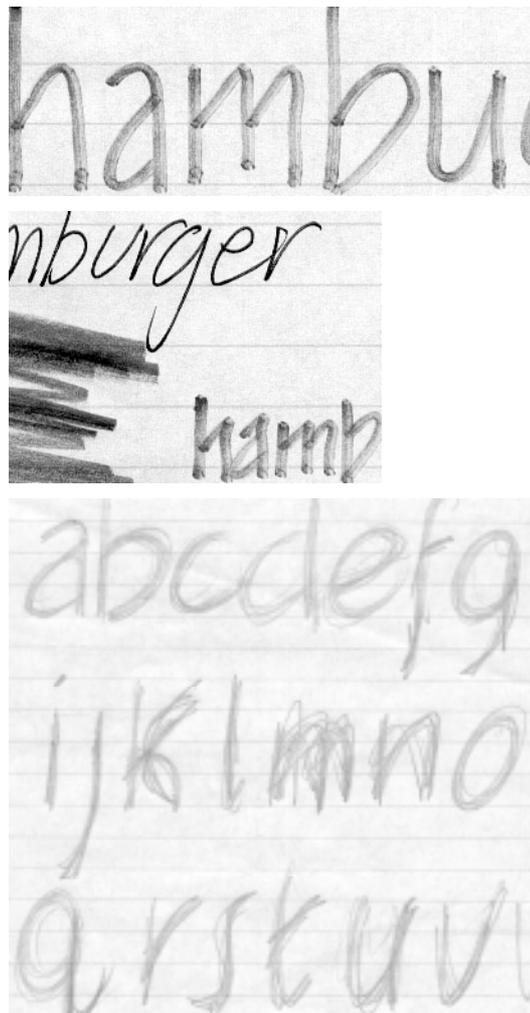


Figure 3: Early sketches

In many forms of handwriting a letter is brought to conclusion by a gestural stroke of anticipation to the letter that is to follow. As previously stated many italic typeface designs, Garamond italic, and of course faux handwriting fonts such as Mistral reference the visual cues in hand written. Opinion would suggest that the human qualities engendered by setting text in such fonts has resulted in their popularity with amateur designers and the general public. Zapf Chancery's popularity as the default for weddings, birth announcements and café menus is noted by Cahalan [3].

I used some of these visual cues in my early glyph designs. Early iterations had a strong modular feel that relied heavily on consistently applied angles and mono-line weight (see Figure 4). The realities of designing a type design that can be flexibly implemented in a range of contexts mean that fine details are often more important rather than overt visual exaggeration, 'things the readers aren't aware of. By seeking advice from more experienced type designers and by closer study of existing font designs, I have gradually improved the subtleties necessary for a more successful outcome. I have progressively redrawn the glyphs so that in word and paragraph a more readable result is possible.

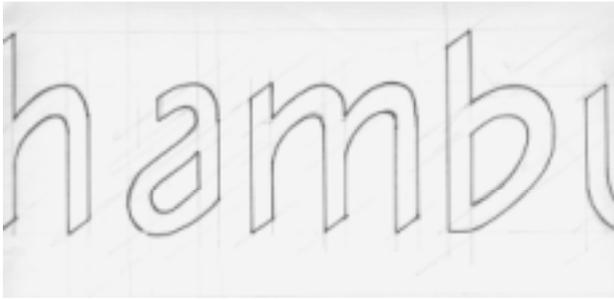


Figure 4: Initial drawings were too regular.

I looked at a range of font designs for inspiration. Eric Gill's Gill Sans is a good example of a classic 20th century sans serif transferred successfully to italic form. Martin Majoor's design rationale for Scala and Seria were invaluable in convincing me that there was conceptual scope in sans serif design innovation [11]. In my own design I wished to take aspects of roman and italic forms and somehow combine them in a manner that would capture some of the rhythmic energy of the handwriting source material in the machine aesthetic of sans serif.



Figure 5 : An early laser print of bezier drawings

I have thought of this project as designing a tone of voice. What is the meaning of this new typeface and in what context could it be appropriately employed? The area between the semantic intention of the designer and the semantic perception of the audience became more obvious to me in the course of the design development. There has been design research into the appropriateness of typography, particularly in its relationship to products[12].

Contemporary, clean, informal, relaxed, rhythmic and fluid are some of the cultural and emotional attributes that I intended the typeface to project. These semantic reference points have often been implied by the designers if not often verbalized in a field ruled largely by convention and intuition[10]. Increasingly they are used by digital foundrys such as FontFont to facilitate type searches of large databases.

There are three significant audiences that I wish to address: type designers and typographers who are keenly aware of the detailed aspects of constructing letter shapes and letter relationships; graphic designers who regularly select and use fonts but do not dwell so much on the type design process; the individual from a non-design background who is presented with reading matter set in the font in question.

The individual reader from a non-design background will

most often be concerned primarily that the information is being delivered efficiently. The graphic designer will also in most cases intend this visual efficiency augmented by their skilful and engaging layout. The type designers will value a design that has been produced with due regard for its intended purpose.

At this stage in the design process I thought it might be useful to conduct some initial evaluation of the emerging design. The semantic differential based on Osgood, Suci and Tannenbaum's [13]work is well established as a useful method for gaining some objective evaluation of subjective perceptions. At this initial stage I constructed a seven layer differential scale based using terms orientated towards the characteristics intended in the design [14].

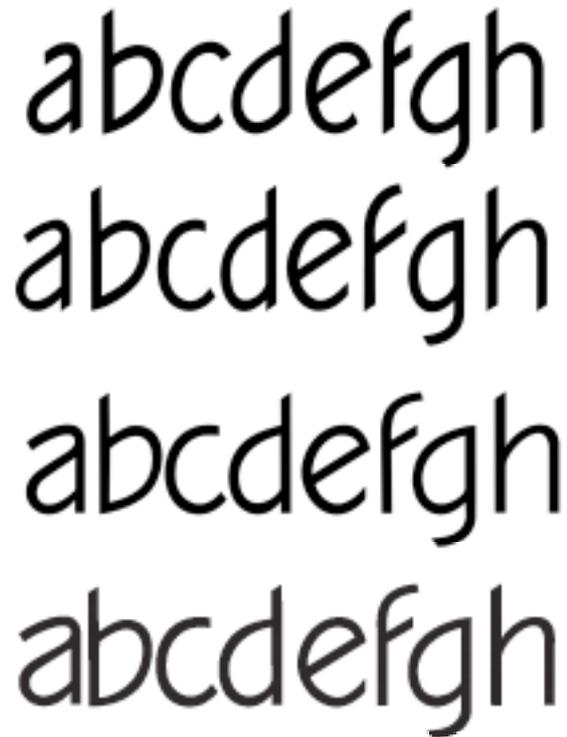


Figure 6: Various iterations in the development process

I selected a range of adjectives and their antonyms that referred to the semantic attributes under consideration, such as, warm, friendly, lively. The initial sample I chose was a group of first year visual communication students who would have an emerging sense of graphic design. Responses demonstrated the potential for useful evaluative feedback to the designer.

The construction of procedures for capturing reliable and valid response data from relevant audiences will be part of the further research.



Innovating successfully within tightly defined constraints is a characteristic of visual communication design that brings satisfaction to the practitioner, and it is technical problem solving and aesthetic judgement that often informs discourse. By further developing my research into semantic intention and perception in the making of a type design I hope to contribute to the discourse surrounding

the role of future typeface design in visual communication.

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