Typography

Typographers' Inn

Peter Flynn

1 Web *vs* Paper

Three years into a long-term project to move an entire organisation's documentation into a consistent format, to move their huge web site into a content management system, and to provide PDF print-on-demand, a row has broken out between the web designers and the people who until now have managed the print versions of the documents. Thirty years of uncontrolled free-for-all has left them with documents in all kinds of formats, both in terms of the physical file type and the design layout.

At the core of the dispute is the question, should the print (PDF) version of a document look the same as the web (HTML) version? The web designers, who have produced a nice-looking site, unsurprisingly say yes, print it from the browser with a print CSS stylesheet, and maintain the layout and the look-and-feel they have given the site. The publications people say no, there are things a print document needs that a web document does not, and vice versa, like referenceable page numbers, a specific typeface, and layout spacing designed for a particular paper size.

Their current house print style includes a number of features difficult to achieve consistently in a browser, such as drop caps, 50% indentation, hanging punctuation, and context-sensitive running headers and footers — the kind of stuff routinely familiar to LaTeX users — but the interesting parts of the debate have centered around the minutiæ. The publications staff, having for years been used to working to tolerances of less than 1pt, are aghast at the rough-and-ready look of browser-printed documents; the web developers, conscious of the need to satisfy customers with hugely disparate technologies, place a high value on the self-adjusting nature of browser formatting.

What has been refreshing is to see the debate spread outside the web developers and the publications office. You see comments in various online design and typographic forums from time to time to the effect that 'no-one is bothered about it these days', often used as a justification for sloppy design or sloppy typesetting. But people *do* take an interest in the details of typography when they have something to make comparisons with.

It is often said that the objective of typographic design is to be invisible; that is, you should arrange things so that the author's message is conveyed as effectively as possible, without the reader necessarily being aware that any design has actually gone on. This is the way most people read. Only people like us actually spend time checking out the typefaces and the design. In the Real World Outside™, layout only gets noticed when it gets in the way, and typefaces get noticed hardly at all.

An average wordprocessor user probably knows that there are several odd-looking letterforms in her font menu, and may well have used some of them for occasional variety in ephemera like birthday invitations and personal correspondence, but letters and reports get typed in Times New Roman because it is 'what everyone else uses'. In the LaTeX classes I teach, I show some enlarged samples of types while explaining the difference between the web and a piece of paper, and almost everyone is surprised at how different they are, and they are shocked that there are — what is it? — 30,000 typefaces in existence.

With what we have to choose from, wouldn't it be nice if documents formatted for paper *did* look different from those printed from the browser display?

2 Oddities of punctuation

TeX users will be aware of the vast range of signs and symbols available (see Scott Pakin's *Comprehensive LaTeX Symbol List* on CTAN), especially in math mode. A user on `comp.text.tex` asked about several of the rarely-used punctuation marks like the asterism (⁂), the irony mark (؟), the doubt mark, and the certainty mark. I had vaguely heard of the first two, so I did a little digging.

The asterism actually exists as a Unicode character, and although it is not implemented in the UTF-8 packages, it is easily constructed in LaTeX:

```
\newcommand{\asterism}{\smash{%
  \raisebox{-.5ex}{%
  \setlength{\tabcolsep}{-.5pt}%
  \begin{tabular}{@{}cc@{}}%
    \multicolumn2c*\\[-2ex]*&*%
    \end{tabular}}}}
```

The value of `\tabcolsep` needs testing for your surrounding typeface and size, and re-expressing in relative units.

The irony mark is even easier with the graphicx package: `\reflectbox?`, but the other two seem to be harder to track down. Wikipedia and Stumbleupon mention them, but without examples. Does anyone know where to find them?

3 Helvetica

Films about typefaces are rare to the point of nonexistence, so the appearance of *Helvetica*, a documentary to mark the typeface's 50th anniversary this year, was a red-letter day in the calendar.

Although it is possibly one of the most heavily-used typefaces in existence (along with Times), it is a tribute to its designers that it has remained so popular and effective for so long. It was one of my first sheets of Letraset, and a recent paean of praise I read linked from Slashdot (and which I failed to bookmark and now cannot find!) went on at length about how suitable it had been found for every possible application, from corporate web pages to labelling the city corporation's waste facilities. Personally I prefer Univers, but there is no question about Helvetica's popularity.

H E L *v e t* ***I C A***
V E T *i c a* ***H E L***
I C A *h e l* ***V E T***

The web site at `http://www.helveticafilm.com/` has details and links, including the dates of screenings worldwide (many already sold out). I write this before it reaches Ireland, and by unfortunate mischance it screens in San Diego a week before the TUG 2007 conference there this year. Those who have already seen it have been very enthusiastic.

4 2008 TUG meeting in Cork

I am of course delighted that TUG has chosen Cork as the site for the 2008 TUG conference. It will be 18 years since it was last held there, and a lot has changed. There is a web site at `http://tug.org/tug2008/`, and I would like to see plenty of papers on typography and typographic design — so get writing!

◇ Peter Flynn
Textual Therapy Division, Silmaril Consultants, Cork, Ireland
Phone: +353 86 824 5333
peter (at) silmaril dot ie
http://blogs.silmaril.ie/peter