

DEATH

The Unfortunate

of Helvetica

Oct 23rd, 2006

I've been holding off a while now writing a follow up to my Open Letter to John Warnock. Partly because I've been hemming and hawing over what topic to write next. But also because I've been waiting for a response from Warnock himself.

That finally came this past weekend.

John Warnock and Chuck Geschke were spotlighted and interviewed by the San Jose Mercury News. In the interview, which you can read online (account required), Ryan Blitstein asked Warnock directly about my open source font request.

Q: Last summer, Andrei Herasimchuk, who spent eight years at Adobe, generated buzz among designers and programmers with an open letter asking Adobe to open-source several of its typefaces online so the Internet would look less boring. What do you think of the idea?

Warnock: It'd be very easy to do that. Adobe can do it with just its own typefaces, but it wouldn't fix the problem. HTML does not have a good way to specify and download typefaces the way PDF does. There are fundamental changes in the Web infrastructure needed to fix this problem.

It's unfortunate that this is the response. Of course the technology needs to be fixed to truly solve the problem. I stated that explicitly in my original letter. And note that Warnock acknowledges that it would "easy" to release a few core fonts, something I know a lot of naysayers out in the blogosphere thought was some large impediment to the issue.

However, it's clear by this response we can expect little to nothing from Adobe on this matter. That's a real shame.

Why do I say that? Just look around on the web. Sure, you'll find design blogs and type geeks like myself spec'ing their CSS using Helvetica as the primary font of choice. But 99.9% of the rest of the web uses Arial or Verdana, both incredibly poor substitutes for a classic like Helvetica.

Walk into major businesses these days and check out what font their everyday, normal written communication is now set in. It sure as hell ain't Helvetica. People use Arial simply because it's loaded onto their machines and they know it'll be there 99% of the time when viewed in a browser or another computer. Within five to ten years, we'll probably have a whole new crop of designers coming out of school who have the web so ingrained into their DNA that few of them will probably even know that Helvetica existed.

And guys like me only have myself to blame.

Recently I attended a workshop conference in Half Moon Bay sponsored by Microsoft. The workshop was called Spark UX. The purpose of the workshop was to discuss how software architects can define their role and what is needed by companies of all shapes and sizes to support design in the architecture role for creating software products. Obviously, Microsoft is keen on the next wave of technology as it hits the business world. That is to say, technology is flattening to the degree that everyone will be able to architect software solutions to drive various business needs both large and small. Microsoft wants to find out ways to help people build those solutions, and they are actually interested in how good design will fit into the process.

Bravo to them. I know little of anyone at Apple doing the same thing, which says a lot about where Microsoft and Apple are positioning themselves for the next decade.

During the lunches and breakout sessions, I started grumbling about typography with some of the folks from Microsoft, as I am wont to do whenever given the chance. It's a sad sight to behold, I must admit. A type and graphic design geek like myself who had an active role in solidifying desktop publishing while at Adobe lamenting about the fact that type sucks on the web. At Adobe, I was in a spot to possibly help change this and I blew it, thinking the whole thing would work itself out.

In this conversation, I brought up my letter to Warnock, along with Jeff Croft's similar rant about the same issue. In the discussion, I made the case for better type as it relates to web sites and enterprise software, pointing out that while it was nice to see Microsoft actually spend money on better screen typography, it does little to help the overall problem since Microsoft seemingly has no intention of releasing the fonts with an open license. It's like Croft states: If the fonts only exist on Windows, designers are back to square one as we have to worry about all systems, not just Windows. No matter how dominant Windows is in the world.

The further I got into this conversation, the more I found myself making the case that Croft's approach might be better than mine. To that end, I asked point blank for the folks from Microsoft to go back to Seattle and make the case to the Windows team there to release the five Vista C fonts, known as the ClearType Font Collection, into the public domain.

Why?

Well obviously, it solves the platform problem. Designers creating web sites need fonts they know will exist on the client machine. And if the client machine does not have the font, then they could at least get the font for free without violating any license.

The next thing is bigger for Microsoft though. They have already paid for the design and production of the fonts. That investment is a fixed cost and is complete. By releasing the fonts into the public domain, they'll do a lot to win the hearts and minds fight with designers that Apple and Adobe have assumed they have already won.

Of all the business sectors Microsoft has historically had a difficult time with, it's the creative community they have the hardest time reaching. This one act would go a long ways toward getting their foot in the door with that sector.

Further, if Microsoft were to do this, in irony of all ironies, they will have done a large part in boosting legitimate type and design on the web. It would not come from Apple nor Adobe. In the history books on design, Microsoft would be remembered for this simple act of planting a few trees in the commons, not their competition.

What negative effects could come from releasing the fonts? None that I can see. There's no way Apple or other major competitors will bother using the fonts in their marketing or branding, so Microsoft need not fear the fonts being used by their competition to brand themselves or their interfaces like Vista. Fear of Linux? That train left the station long ago, and giving Linux users something better to look at on screen isn't going to end the world for Microsoft. And while at the heart of my request was to release a few core fonts that have passed the test of time for functionality, readability and utility, even I can recognize that the new Vista C Fonts are much easier on the eyes on the screen. They are very well designed. Could the Vista C Fonts become classics? Releasing them will give them a shot to pass or fail that test on their own merits. It's looking like Georgia will serve it's purpose year over year in this regard.

Whether anyone at Microsoft can be convinced of this is not something I can predict. But consider this post my official request for them to do so.

I can already see the all the free publicity Microsoft would get from the entire creative community over such an act. It would be a sight to behold for sure.

So to Helvetica, I ask for forgiveness and pity, even though I deserve neither. I hope that if I make it to the ripe old age of 80 or so, that I can pick up my brand new digital ink WiFi device, surf over to the latest issue of the Mercury News online, and read the headlines set in such a timeless classic like Helvetica. I doubt that will happen. It feels already like Helvetica has faded too quickly.

Some call that progress I guess. I call it a tragedy.