

USE ANY FONT ON THE WEB

Web design: use any font [2005]

Typographic variety does not need to be sacrificed in order to make text "visible" to search engines on the web. The typography can be done using any text composition software and then converted to an image. The text can then be duplicated – as text this time – and included on the same web page. If you do not wish the duplicated text to interfere with the design, locate it off the normal working area of the page.

This is a simple trick but it has profound implications for web design. You can use any fonts you like.

TYPOGRAPHY ON THE WEB IS BORN!
HAPPY EASTER.

There is evidently a method which has been used by web publishers to increase their "ratings" with search engines in which text containing repeated key words is "hidden" on the page. There are a number of techniques for doing this, the most common being to color the text the same as the background. Search engines supposedly now recognize this ploy and penalize for it. The purpose and implementation of such practices are, obviously, very different from what is proposed here. There is no intention to hide anything, only to be able to do "real" typography on the web.

There may be many other subtexts to this strategy. I myself am a web designer of limited experience. This technique occurred to me as I was designing my own website, the first and only site I have designed thus far. I am a type designer. I wanted to display my type designs. This is what set me to thinking – quite literally – outside the box. I have now been using this method on my own site for the past few months and periodically checking the results with Google and other search engines. The text is there.

Sumner Stone
Easter 2005

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Novitski Letter re: Web design: use any font

Duplicating page elements in both image and text is not a new technique. Most people who replace plain text with images make the plain text go away, but there are very good reasons (chiefly ones of accessibility) to leave the plain text on the page.

If one's only reason for including plain text is to satisfy the search engines, there are a variety of techniques for doing so that will hide the text, including the use of CSS to position the text off-screen {position: absolute; right: 200%;} or to make it very small and position it underneath the replacement image.

However, providing both image and plain text circumvents two of the main objections to image-based type: that it can't be resized and that it can't be read by non-visual user-agents. (The browser Opera is one of the few that can resize images, and then of course the images break up when enlarged beyond their original resolution.) Including plain text on the page provides people with visual impairments something to enlarge and those using screen readers and Braille readers something to read.

Of course, providing a plain-text alternative to type-as-image will not help people with limited sight if they don't know the plain text is there! It's important to include a prompt or a link to let folks know where to go to find text they can read. And then of course the prompt itself must be made readable.

Some web designers create two paths through a site, one image- or Flash-based and the other text-based. It isn't necessary to actually produce two sets of pages for this purpose: with the simple application of server- or client-side scripting, a single page can exhibit multiple personas based on choices made by the user. A page can come up initially with its type in images, but the visitor can click a button to reload the page in text-only format, their choice carrying forward to other pages in the site until they switch back. This method is frequently used to produce multilingual websites.

The other common objection to type-as-image is that of bandwidth. However, if the type blocks are kept down to a reasonable size, they can be delivered relatively quickly even to those using dial-up connections.

Also pertinent to this topic is ability of the PHP scripting language to create image from text on the fly.

Paul Novitski, novitskisoft.com
March 29, 2005

Update [2007]

The note from Paul Novitski was the only response to my Easter message in 2005 that seemed worth publishing. My graphic designer friends referred me to their "web consultants" who almost universally dismissed the idea as unworkable because the rating of a website by search engines would be downgraded for "hiding" HTML text, a practice used to illegitimately raise the rating of a site. This is a red herring hardly worth mentioning except that the professional "experts" raised it as their primary objection. If this simple implementation for typography on the Web were widely adopted and incorporated into applications an open typography could be achieved with little effort. What is at stake here? Typography on the web.

The Freeway application from SoftPress makes it abundantly clear how simple it would be to construct an automated inclusion of text along with the properly prepared text as image. As Mr. Novitski points out, text files converted to images produce very small .gif files. There is no reason to delay this inevitable advance in which real typography is finally brought to the web.

Where are the tools from applications developers to support this obvious next step? The rich typographic environment which is within our grasp will enliven and invigorate the visual presence of the web. At the moment the pitifully small selection of typefaces available on every computer are the only ones that are normally used for text.

This is an embarrassment for the entire computer industry and is one of the things that makes the screen a second class citizen when compared with print. The whole dismal situation is entirely unnecessary. So far, every objection to implementing this scheme seems insignificant in the face of its potential impact on the graphic power of the Web.

Sumner Stone
June 2007

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