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Typography

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Typographers' Inn

Peter Flynn

1   The electronic book

For years (seems like centuries) we have seen forecasts that the electronic book is just round the corner, and soon we'll be able to let the trees grow in peace because there won't be any more demand for printing onto paper.

About 10 years ago I did a TV interview about the launch of some new e-book products and an impending software-only release from Microsoft. The marketing droids were out in force, predicting the immediate demise of the printed page, so my whines about 'it's the file format, stupid' went unheard.

A decade has come and gone, and we still keep hearing that e-paper and e-ink are where it's at. In 2001 (I think), at the TeX Users Group meeting at the University of Delaware, we even had a presentation from IBM about their research into e-paper, which was fascinating. It seems to be tantalizingly close each time, but never quite seems to make it.

The latest device is the Kindle, and it has garnered a growing and eager following, with a wireless connection that works, and a good number of titles coming out from publishers who would previously have dismissed the technology. But it suffers from poor interface design, poor provision of typefaces, and the proprietary tie-in to Amazon. Amazingly, it accepts file formats other than its native AZW (a variant of HTML), including Word, PDF, and Mobi… but not the one format that is designed for the job, the Open Publication Structure (OPS, successor to the Open eBook or OEB format of unhappy memory).

As I write this, publishers and manufacturers are meeting at the Digital Book 2009 conference in New York, run by the International Digital Publishing Forum, who manage OPS, trying to identify the business case for e-books. It's notable that the sponsors are the manufacturers: the publishers are nowhere to be seen. It's all about workflow and Digital Right Management (DRM) — not a whisper about typefaces or formatting.

So where does this leave those of us who set type? It's easy to create nice PDFs with LaTeX, and they can be done for the precise dimensions of the device's screen with great accuracy. But if you want to read your e-book on several devices (desktop, laptop, handheld, e-book reader, or even your cellphone), you need a separately-optimized version for each.

Enter reflowable PDF, which will let the text content of a PDF document behave like HTML in your browser: change the shape of the window, and all the text reformats automatically to fit. After the TeX Users Group meeting in Cork last year, there was an impromptu session on this which hasn't progressed very far (details in the mailing list at `http://lists.ucc.ie/xml-tex-pdf.html`).

This isn't the perfect solution; it's fine for novels and other books consisting of continuous, uninterrupted text, but it isn't easy to make it work for mathematics or for books with chunks of code. TeX systems, on the other hand, are nothing if not programmable, so I'm asking anyone working in this area to consider joining the mailing list and sharing their thoughts. Wouldn't it be nice if the solution came from the TeX field?

2   Breaking the mold

When did you last design a whole book, from end to end?

At the TeX Users Group meeting in San Diego two years ago I was generously presented with a copy of Valerie Kirschenbaum's wonderful book *Goodbye Gutenberg* [1]. It's 400 pages of rich color, with each double-page spread separately designed and drawn (or typeset). It's fascinating, and you can have almost as much fun with it as you can with the *Très Riches Heures* of the Duc de Berry (*c.* 1415).

The author's aim is to rescue books from the slough of black-and-white reproduction, where every page is the same layout as the others, and to return to the creativity of the era before printing, where pages could differ. She asserts that print and layout technology is now at a stage where this can be done with little or no increase in cost.

In respect of a book designed to illustrate her purpose, she succeeds admirably, although she shows considerable naivety in her assumptions about typesetting and presswork costs, and ignores completely the need for consistency in reference books and heavily-structured documents. She is right, of course, that book 'design' has been in decline for decades (with a few notable exceptions), and that technology has indeed advanced to the point where what she proposes is *technically* feasible — if not financially — like Heyerdahl and Severin in the field of exploration, she has actually done it.

So what do we do when faced with yet another publisher's Compositor's Specification? I've had three in the last year which have appeared to have

been written (or drawn) by a teenager with 15 minutes' experience of Word. Inconsistent, inaccurate, and inappropriate; and in one case accompanied by an equally inaccurate PDF supposed to be an example of the output. I'm not sure where the publishers get these from, but it's clear that at least some 'designers' have only the vaguest idea of how text gets from the author's fingertips onto the printed page. In any event they appear not to have actually looked through the book to see what kinds of things they need to provide for, so you get specs with no information about how they want figures to look; what to do with second or third level lists; or how to format the endnotes.

Perhaps we should after all start to think about redesigning the book. After all, if the publishers (with the occasional honorable exception) cannot now be bothered to design even the whole of their own books, perhaps they would give us free rein to do the job for them. We surely can't be any worse at it than the authors.

3 RIOTING TYPOGRAPHERS RAMPAGE ONLINE!

The TYPO-L mailing list, which I refer to from time to time, is populated by well over 100 ladies and gentlemen of the industry, who conduct themselves with a decorum becoming to their profession, and occasionally venture to submit or answer a question, trusting that their colleagues will do the same for them on another occasion. I happen to be the List Owner of this happy band of typophiles, and I hardly ever have cause to intervene, except to fix the occasional glitch or to update a member's email address. Sometimes days or even a week can go past without a message, and then there is a small burst of activity over some common topic.

During April, however, over 13,000 lines of email were exchanged, much of it to celebrate or disparage '50 Years of Stupid Grammar Advice', as the topic was named, after an article by Geoffrey Pullum [2], in which he discusses the 'limp platitudes [and] inconsistent nonsense' in Strunk & White's [in]famous *The Elements of Style*.

Something obviously touched a raw nerve somewhere, something only understandable by those who have had to suffer the insistence of learned academics stubbornly insisting on wholly inappropriate matters of style, or had to undo the depredations of unlearned students whose heads had been stuffed with outdated regulations. As I have mentioned before, we get called upon to exercise much more than LaTeX, and often have to deal with orthographic and

syntactic errors when there is no-one else qualified or experienced enough to correct them.

As many posters pointed out, S&W contains a wealth of useful material as well as useless. It follows a kind of 80/20 rule (or is it 90/10?) which covers most aspects of most things rather than all aspects of everything, and is intended as a general guide rather than the absolute prescription as which it is often mistakenly presented. While I usually reserve my own venom for the trifling foolishnesses of the MLA in their placement of punctuation, I count myself lucky to have been spared the worst of Messrs Strunk & White by fortune of having been born outside their ambit, so I kept schtumm for most of it.

If you're interested in what typesetters talk about behind the authors' and publishers' backs, you can join the list and read the discussion in the archives at `http://listserv.heanet.ie/typo-l.html`

4 Periodic table of typefaces

Thanks to Michael Brady for pointing this out in the TYPO-L mailing list: `http://www.behance.net/Gallery/Periodic-Table-of-Typefaces/193759`
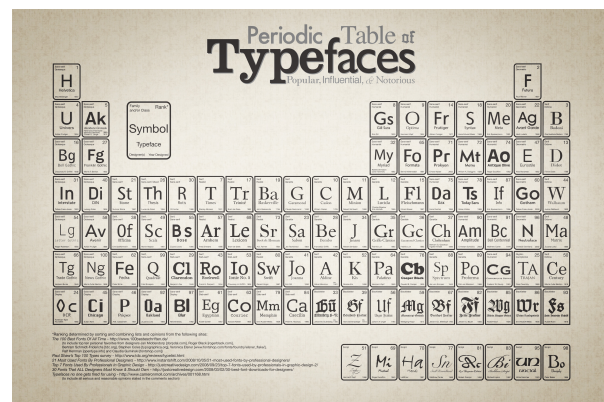
They also do a nice 25.5″ × 17″ print.

References

[1] Valerie Kirschenbaum. *Goodbye Gutenberg*. Global Renaissance Society, New York, 2005.

[2] Geoffrey K Pullum. 50 Years of Stupid Grammar Advice. *The Chronicle Review*, Apr 2009.

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