

New plastic weapons

A review of ten radical 21st century type designs

by Nick Shinn



LINGUA by Eric Olson

processtypefoundry.com

The OpenType font format can contain large numbers of contextual ligatures. This has been most exploited in scripts such as Zapfino, known for the single wordmark/glyph that sets when the letters Z-a-p-f-i-n-o are typed. However, the true design potential of this new format was suggested, before its invention, by the many bizarre ligatures

Zuzana Licko created for Mrs Eaves (now available as Emigre's first OpenType font). This new way of connecting letters exists not to mimic the look of writing, nor to parody the kludges of

metal type, but as an aesthetic development of the ability of digital font software to manage huge sets of multi-character glyphs.

Eric Olson has picked up the ball with Lingua.

Realizing that some kind of limitcheck was required on the interminable, meaningless task of creating thousands of ligatures for every possible character combination, Olson refined his choice of combinations by statistical analysis, to 200 of those most prevalent in the English language. Two weeks of feature newspaper articles and one novel were fed into the specially built Ligature Counter application. The resulting letter pair combos were then averaged and used for the Lingua ligatures.

Experimental design that follows the principles of What-if? and Because-we-can! redefines beauty. The most elegant solutions to previously unposed problems are shocking and ugly in their strangeness. The stark angularity of Lingua is not a whim of Olson's: it is the logical outcome of putting ligatures where none have gone before. As one begins to appreciate the way that form here follows function, the beauty emerges.

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ALFON AND GIACOMO

by James Montalbano

terminaldesign.com

This selection is not, of course, radical in the sense of implementing any new design ideas, as with the other faces here. But these two traditional types nonetheless go to the root of type design in a way that is thoroughly original.

Nothing is quoted or borrowed. Each glyph is ren-

dered according to a systematic execution of harmonious design characteristics: the "language" of the typeface, its plastic qualities, namely—topologically precise skeletal letter forms, relative proportion of x-height, cap height, extender length, relative widths of letters, angle of stress, degree of contrast, angle of ter-

minals, roundness/ellipticality of curves, thickness and angle of joints, and complexity of detail. These characteristics have quite specific values. So, when a typeface is conceived in this manner, it is from scratch, and not merely by restyling the already complex forms of other types and designers.

Alfon and Giacomo are a comprehensive pair of typefaces, each with a large family and a full OpenType character set. Their personality is subtly drawn yet far from bland, a balance of contrasting qualities. For instance, in Alfon the roundness of the curved stokes is played against the angularity of the serifs, which in turn is offset by their slight bowing, and finely softened corners. If there is one word to describe them, it would be "friendly," which is not surprising as their designer is part of the New York school. Friendly, like golden era Madison Avenue print ads with their conversational copy; friendly, like classic ITC faces with their big x-heights and funky serifs. With a back story in advertising typography and magazine art direction, Montalbano represents the vibrancy and sophistication of American commercial culture, full of personality.

Graphic design is not information architecture. It is not a service industry. It is not a means of self-expression. It is not computer effects. It is not the manipulation of style referents. The graphic designer's primary task is to create new forms. (You could say the same about any creative work, and it would be true.)

Robert Motherwell, objecting to the layers of meaning that had been attached to his paintings and those of peers such as Jackson Pollock, explained: "Plastic automatism is very little a question of the unconscious. It is much more a plastic weapon with which to create new forms." Meaning was incidental. He just wanted to paint new stuff, and for a while action painting was a concept that made that possible.

Consider the typefaces shown here as plastic weapons. The firepower lies in the original ideas that structure their formal language. No revivals. No retro. No rip-offs. And above all, no me-too redundancy.

That spirit will inform any work in which they are used.



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INFINITY by Chester
and Rick Valicenti

thirstype.com

Modernity is easy to fake, by using the proven modern types of prior eras, such as the 1930s (Futura, DIN), the 1950s (Helvetica), or the 1970s (Frutiger, aka Myriad). Without the benefit of historical perspective, it's hard to say what is, so far, the quintessentially 21st Century sans, but I would hazard a guess that Infinity wouldn't

be far off the mark. Most significant is its Post-modern complexity, establishing its character deftly in three separate areas, and in each of them by subtle distinction: letter form, curve shape, and detail.

Firstly, in the lower case, there is an ellipsis of certain letter parts, in particular, it looks as if many of the vertical stems are incomplete. Secondly, and this is related, each full curve is not consistent, but partly straight, and the transition between the straight and bent part of these strokes is abrupt. And thirdly is the mannerist, arbitrary treatment of terminals, some rounded, others cleanly cut.

Overall, what ties these design themes together is an ambivalent relationship between straight and round: that which is usually straight is made somewhat round; that which is usually round is somewhat straightened. A metrosexual type.



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n a r i m

UNIBODY
by Akiem Helmling,
Bas Jacobs, and
Sami Kortemäki

underware.nl

Anti-aliasing: turn it off. This "pixel" typeface family is designed specifically for Flash MX and Photoshop at 8 pt. size, giving a sharp, bitmapped quality on low resolution screens.

Unibody stands out from the pixel font crowd with two

typographically sophisticated design features. First, it comes in a co-ordinated family of five styles: Regular, Italic, Bold, Black, and Small Caps. And second, the Italic tackles the nasty jaggies and excessive slant customary in pixel italics, by going upright. The letter forms are sufficiently italic, and the width is narrower than the Roman, so its function as a contrast font is quite clear.



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M B R C

PERLA
by Gareth Hague

veer.com

Using the same formal vocabulary as Bodoni and Didot, Hughes' playful equalized-height didone will produce, by a careful disposition of capital, lowercase, and alternate forms, wordmarks and text with the rich quality of custom typography.

As with Dalliance (see next page), the variety of alternates gives typographers who work

with this face the opportunity to exercise and refine their powers of discrimination in a very hands-on manner. In its own way, Bodoni is as modernist as Futura. Just don't consider serifs or stress contrast as historical signifiers, but as plastic features — rationalize and extemporize, and there you have Perla: modern jazz.

Clearly monstr why. Bu landsca

LUX SANS by Greg Lindy

<http://lux.thirstype.com>

In the wake of Quay Sans (1990) and especially Meta (1991), a contemporary genre of dull, functional European sans serif faces has emerged, published by the German FontFont brand. Fago, Info, and Zine (for some reason, a four-letter name is a requisite) are somewhat condensed, squarish, nuanced in finish, and with an evenness of

character width (especially noticeable in the capitals). Greg Lindy's latest face, Section, is another such exercise in orthodoxy—although Sect would have been a more appropriate name.

Prior to this, Lindy had designed the altogether more interesting Lux Sans, a marvellous combination of sustained invention and utility. Lux Sans is an unlikely candidate for popularity. It is not dumped on the market in vast quantities, free to anyone who owns a major Adobe application; it is only distributed at one source, Thirstype; and it does have more than its fair share of

quirks—but what are these points of interest if not assets?

There are three features of particular note. First is the cursive form of the lower case italic. Usually in a humanist sans, the italic is quite similar in form to the roman, and slightly narrower. In Lux Sans, the spacious fit of the roman is maintained in the italic, and the added little tails create a style of marked emphasis.

Second is the thickness of the angled strokes leading into the joint in lowercase forms, such as n, u. In the asymmetric counters of the b, p, d and q, the calligraphic, humanist origin of this feature is clearly demonstrated. This structure is also found in Thesis and Scala Sans, which appear to be two faces Lindy is playing off—he has quoted the splayed M of Thesis, and the asymmetric w of Scala Sans. However, he does this not to steal cachet, but to set up his major development, the third feature, which is the “lower case” joint at the top of the B, D, P, and R.

In as much as it creates an extra short, protruding stroke, this detail is repeated in the A and W. The novel B has precedents—in Goudy Sans, for instance—so this is clearly a face in the classic tradition. Its quirks are not contemporary (as with Infinity, below), so it has a wide range of application.

In all, the features that make Lux Sans unique are integrated to create a consistently purposeful typeface, an alternative to those bland, generic sans faces that are everywhere and nowhere, saying nothing.

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SEBASTIAN by Frantisek Storm

stormtype.com

In the realm of historical fiction, Storm displays a convincing verité. Steeped in the Baroque ethos, Sebastian purports to be a sans serif type from 100 years before the invention of the genre. The pretense is conveyed not merely by the generous proportions of the letters and features such as the “st” ligature, but also by a dog-eared irregularity of

stroke which simulates the artefacts of rough letterpress printing.

Certainly, we have seen anachronism before, but of the humanist kind (Gill, Syntax, Optima) and with a smooth, 20th century fluidity. Though close in structure, Peter Bil’ak’s Eureka Sans, also an angular, Slavic grotesque with small x-height, has a contemporary, refined, even color. Primitive and spicy, Sebastian conveys the exotic glamour of impossible worlds.

While obviously conceived as a sans version of Storm’s Serapion typeface (with which it makes a good tag team), Sebastian is no mere “serifs snipped” version, but executed with its own character. In this sense, the relationship between the faces is similar to that between Perpetua and Gill Sans.

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DALLIANCE by Frank Heine

emigre.com

If Sebastian is to be considered an historical fiction, Dalliance Roman is historical fantasy. (Neither being a reiteration of historical fact, they are “retro” just by allusion.)

Proceeding from the Script, which is fairly faithfully based on the writing in a war map of 1798, Frank Heine has concocted a roman style of antique yet ahistorical provenance. With

Post-modern nerve and verve, most of the roman shapes were conceptualized by backslanting the italic.

The capitals have enough lower case forms to create a unicast vibe in all-cap setting, both harking back to uncials and blackletter, while relating to the standard mixed case model (Bradbury Thompson’s Typeface 26), and current flirtations with experimental alphabets. Copious ligatures, ornaments and flourishes mean just one thing for typographers: playtime! Against the brutal norm of text configured for the efficient transmission of literal data, the heresy of Dalliance counters: linger awhile, enjoy the typography.

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PANOPTICA
by Nick Shinn

shinntype.com

When poet Christian Bök (Eunoia, Crystallography) asked me to recommend a monowidth typeface for setting shaped verse, I realized immediately that there was nothing suitable, and that the answer would be a unicast design.

I've long had an interest in this kind of visual poetry, and disliked the ugliness of

the customary typewriter setting; also, in recent years I've taught a course in type design centred on designing a unicast font, which has made me very aware of the flexibility of letter form—so I was primed to invent a new formula for typefaces: Monowidth + Unicast.

In Panoptica, by combining upper and lower case letter shapes in a unicast, two monowidth font problems are solved at one stroke—both distancing text from the utilitarian stigma of the typewriter, by virtue of the typeface's novelty, and simultaneously achieving a far more even texture than usual.

After I had finished the Old Style Roman, which I considered

appropriate for verse, Bök suggested a sans serif would be better for a series of his "Cyborg" poems. I did that, and took it a step further with the reductive Doesburg style, based on the completely square lettering of the De Stijl artist, Theo van Doesburg.

At this point I realized that the monowidth constraint, placed on a fairly typical unicast alphabet, gives rise to a quite specific set of forms, and one that is capable of maintaining its identity in whatever style it is rendered. This was more than a typeface, it was a universal alphabet.

The Panoptic alphabet is similar to the standard unicast, introduced in Typeface 26, where the A, E, M and N of an upper case alphabet are replaced by their lower case forms. The I too has been replaced, with a version that has wide horizontal stems at top and bottom (these are not serifs), and the Y is given a lower case form with a small tail. The monowidth proportions of the letters are also a defining characteristic of the alphabet.

The last of the 10 Panoptica fonts to be completed was the Italic, an absurd proposition, given the contradictory criteria of unicast and italic within a monowidth constraint—but a challenge which I relished. The key was the "left-handed stress" of Goudy's 1927 Companion, which I had previously used in Oneleigh.

The extreme metric regularity of Panoptica, which also has (with the exception of slight tails on the "q" and "y") a uniform height, creates new layout possibilities.

MEG
STY
ADV

KLAXON by Rian Hughes

devicefonts.co.uk or veer.com

As befits a product of Device Fonts, Klaxon is descended from primitive electrical numerical displays developed by engineers in the 1960s for watches, elevators, and stove tops. This high-tech look was captured by Alan Meeks in the 1981 typeface LCD (Letraset).

Another forebear is Fregio Mecano, an Italian typeface of the 1920s whose every character could be composed, and reconfigured in various proportions, from 20 basic segments. An iteration of this is available digitally as Section.

Pixelization, or construction from a uniform field of elements, is a dominant force in this broad genre, but the idea of constructing characters from complex modular components, and having that modularity show as texture, is quite distinct. It is apparent in several recent typefaces, for instance Simon Schmidt's Delay (Fountain). In some cases, such as Stephan Müller's Airport (FontFont), the texture is the whole point of the exercise.

So, what at first seems to be a straightforward type category reveals a spectrum of motivations between function and effect.

Klaxon is in it for the effect. It's an ingenious design constructed on a unique framework, but Hughes, playing to the crowd, has sacrificed strict functionality for the sake of smooth appearance: the V is a cheat, and because the typeface is not monowidth, the potential for a unique kind of motion animation is thwarted. Nonetheless, on its own terms, this is a quite brilliant typeface.

This is a cursory, subjective selection from the dozens of truly innovative designs that have already been released this century, and I have surely omitted some highly significant faces. There is a lively, international culture of type design, and it can provide graphic designers willing to exercise their taste with the tools to create genuine, new forms of design that will set them apart from the crowd. 🌐

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