
Editorial comments

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Our plague year

As I write this, all activity and commerce are shut down over much of the world. Schools are closed, students have been sent home, and I’ve just eaten my last restaurant meal until who knows when. More relevant to this audience, the DANTE and Bacho \TeX meetings have been cancelled, to the great disappointment of many eager participants. We shall have to wait, to find out what the next few months will bring, before we’ll know whether this catastrophe will affect TUG 2020 in Rochester as well.

Elsewhere in these pages are some items that deserve mention.

- The announcement of the Grapholinguistics conference, scheduled for June, will be held electronically rather than in Paris. Watch the linked website for further announcements.
- The general shutdown has extended to my local libraries. Since the published hyphenation authority exists only on paper (Webster’s *Third International Dictionary*), and I don’t own a copy, it hasn’t been possible to verify some of the proposed additions to the hyphenation exception list. The current addendum is less complete than intended, but this is somewhat balanced by the update of the cumulative version on CTAN. When resources are once again available, both an additional update and cumulative list will be released.
- The history of the differential “d”, promised in the last issue, also requires library access. Like the hyphens, completion of this item depends on the return of normal access.

Not triggered by the virus but nonetheless important for their own sakes, and in the first case, timely, these articles deserve attention.

- The next review by Don Knuth of the \TeX /METAFONT complex is scheduled for 2021. To help prepare, David Fuchs invites (see his article in this issue, pp. 8–11) users of plain \TeX and METAFONT to search their archives for documents making use of unusual \TeX niques that can in turn be used to exercise nooks and crannies of the Knuthian engines that might have slipped through the cracks explored by the `trip` and `trap` tests.
- This issue’s “DuckBoat” has a new subtitle, “Beginner’s Pond”, and a comment that the “articles may appear too trivial for a serious journal like

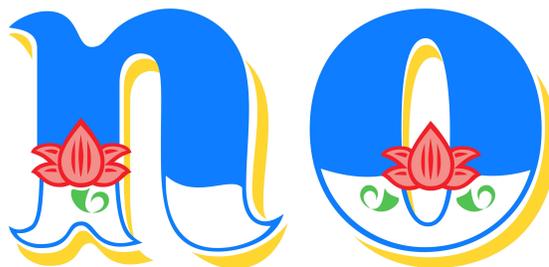
the *TUGboat*.” I call your attention to this item in the *TUGboat* Editor’s wish list:¹ “More tutorials and expository material, particularly for new users and users who aren’t intending to become \TeX wizards.” So, Prof. van Duck, don’t apologize!

Uddike Award for Student Type Design

For several years now, a challenge has been made to typographic design students to develop a typeface influenced by materials in the Uddike Collection on the History of Printing, one of the Special Collections at the Providence Public Library. The most recent award ceremony, the fifth, was held on 25 October 2019, accompanied by a panel discussion, “Revival Meeting”, featuring type designers who have created digital types based on historical types from the earliest days of European printing up to the demise of the general use of metal type.

Awards were presented to three students:

- Malika Nanda (first place), for *Mojaris*, a decorative face inspired by models she encountered in her native Bombay.



One inspiration was a slipper with an upturned pointed toe. The influence can be seen in the shape of the curvy serifs.



- Benjamin Tuttle, for *No Gothic*, a bold sans serif face, with alternate shapes for the capital “G” and both the upper- and lowercase “S”.

¹ <https://tug.org/tugboat/wish.html>

- Liam Spradlin, for *Girassol*, a sans serif display face, inspired by street signs seen in Portuguese cities.

Presentation of the awards was followed by questions to the three finalists, asking why they chose the particular styles, and what inspired them to undertake font design. Two of the responses cited an attraction to graphical objects observed in the student’s surroundings; the third noted the desire to have a unique and idiosyncratic medium to be used in personal communication. These goals are met admirably.

Of the four participants in the panel discussion, three are active designers: Paul Barnes (Commercial Type), Marie Otsuka (Occupant Fonts), and David Jonathan Ross (Font of the Month Club). The fourth, Elizabeth Carey Smith (Creative Director at the Bank of New York) acted as moderator.

One discussion topic was the reason for revivals. From an educational point of view, it teaches an understanding of the structure of a font, and experience in how to get a feeling for what looks correct. Besides, it’s hard work.

Another reason is that a revival might be commissioned. When undertaking a commission, an important aspect of the work is to determine what it is that the person making the commission really likes about the font. Often this is the look of the printed specimen, in which case strict adherence to the actual type matrix is probably not advisable.

Questions from the audience included a request for recommendations for making a successful career of font design. A logical response was to develop families rather than single fonts; when more options are available, if a client likes one after using it, there are more that can be acquired.

The next award will be presented in 2021, and will thereafter be scheduled every two years. Details, including the guidelines for entering the competition, are given on the library’s website.²

Questions for Paul Barnes: *Nature*, revivals

After the presentation, I got a chance to talk briefly with Paul Barnes. His firm has designed the new type for the journal *Nature*,³ and he observed that all the symbols drove them crazy. (Christian Schwartz, Barnes’ collaborator in the foundry, was responsible for the symbols.) The font, like most custom de-

signs, is under exclusive license to the commissioning organization, through 2024.

I asked whether *Nature* accepted L^AT_EX as an input medium. Yes, but the production flow goes through several conversions. The final archival files are held in a standardized form of XML, and for the print version, the material is flowed into InDesign.

On the subject of revivals, an online video of an interesting lecture Barnes gave last summer at Cooper Union⁴ further illuminates the topic of the evening’s discussion.

Resources — finding things

Identifying a font Earlier this year, I was sent on a quest by Mike Spivak to determine the fonts used to typeset one of his books on differential equations. The results of this search were equivocal; I was able to identify the main text and math fonts (Monotype Baskerville, with digits from some version of Times used in math and text, but curiously the Baskerville digits used for page numbers), but failed to identify the large digits used for the chapter numbers. (I later learned that it may have been a custom creation.) However, I *did* learn about some resources for identifying fonts.

- WhatTheFont!⁵ will search a database to match the image of a character presented on a smart phone or other online device. (It works well for letters and digits; I recognized the symbols as what was available for Monotype at that period, so didn’t test any, but will have to try that sometime.)
- Identifont⁶ presents several questions that narrow down the possibilities and then shows potential matches to be examined. Unfortunately, “italic” is considered to be script or calligraphic, so this was unsatisfactory for the topic of my quest, where matching the italic “N” was essential to the identification.
- fonts.com⁷ has a very extensive collection of fonts, although when I rechecked, no “identifier” tools. However, if the name of the basic roman style is known or suspected, the corresponding bold and italic are likely to be there for checking; a sample text can be input to match against the subject example.

² <https://www.provlib.org/research-collections/special-collections/updike/updike-prize-student-type-design/>

³ <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-03083-5>

⁴ https://coopertype.org/event/the_past_is_the_present

⁵ <https://www.myfonts.com/WhatTheFont/>

⁶ <http://www.identifont.com/>

⁷ <https://www.fonts.com/>

(L)T_EX Q&A — TopTeX A new Question and Answer website has appeared.⁸ Describing itself as “a friendly community for TeX questions and answers”, it is part of the open source and not-for-profit platform `topanswers.xyz`.

The scope is similar to `tex.stackexchange.com`, but there are differences. As an “independent” site, its direction depends more on the needs and wishes of its participants than on any corporate policy. One feature mentioned for possible future adoption is that general, encyclopedic, articles will be welcome; these are explicitly discouraged on StackExchange. This is still a work in progress, one that will be controlled by the members.

When the site is opened in a browser, the immediate reaction is one of surprise at the bright color. (My view might be influenced by a very old browser on a laptop with an out-of-support operating system; new hardware is on order.) The screen real estate is split in two, with a wider panel on the left; this is devoted to the list of questions. The right side is a narrower column holding the main chat. To access an item on either column it is necessary to scroll, using either a mouse or touch pad; I haven’t yet found a way to scroll from the keyboard, but I haven’t asked either.

As with any new site, navigation takes a bit of getting used to, but nothing is too deeply hidden. One feature that seems to be absent is a profile area where a participant can share some personal background; it can take a newcomer a while to determine the strengths and interests of other participants. Most participants identify themselves by nicknames, but this isn’t any different from other forums or discussion lists. I’ve learned that enhancing the profile features is on the to-do list, but other improvements have higher priority.

An attractive enhancement, appearing just before this *TUGboat* issue is sent to the printer, is the addition of a non-English “sister community”. The language is Marathi, and it will be presented in the Devanagari script. (The announcement illustrates the “blog” category of posted items.)

This is still a work in progress, and will grow in directions still unknown, but responsive to its participants. It will be refreshing to not be surprised by the kinds of changes that have appeared with little warning on the StackExchange complex. One inquiry I made, about a feature that I thought was suboptimal, was quickly accepted as a bug by a member of the support group. Give it a try.

⁸ <https://topanswers.xyz/tex>

Thoughts on asking questions in a public forum

Anyone using T_EX is going to have questions. Long-time users have often developed their own personal networks, but even so, it is sometimes helpful to reach out to a public forum. There are several such forums available to T_EX users—managed online Q & A sites like StackExchange and the new TopTeX, older mailing lists like `texhax`, and public “notice boards” like `comp.text.tex`. Each of these has its own advantages and audience. But some things are common, if one wants to get a quick, accurate, and useful answer.

- A small compilable file that gives the result or illustrates the question as described. This was the primary topic of the first DuckBoat column.⁹
- The context in which the answer is needed. For example, is it to be submitted for publication in a particular journal, is it for a thesis, is it for some personal use, something else?
- What is the subject area: (pure) mathematics, physics (theoretical or experimental), linguistics, The notations and conventions may be different for seemingly similar circumstances.
- What is your deadline? Please don’t leave this until the last minute! Plan ahead!

The goal of a question is to get an accurate, useful answer. The more precise the question, the more likely it is to attract potential helpers.

Even if a problem is interesting, and someone looking at it is familiar with the area and thinks they know the answer, it’s a real drag to have to guess the document class, only to be told later that it isn’t the one being used. After being contradicted in this manner, a helper will be less likely to react favorably the next time.

Value the time that the helper will invest in answering your question. That will increase the likelihood that your next question will be met with respect.

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⁹ <https://tug.org/TUGboat/tb38-3/tb120duck.pdf>