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A Brief Introduction to Impact: 'The Meme Font'

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Abstract

If you have ever seen an image macro, the chances are you've seen Impact, a typeface so commonly used in these memes that it could be called 'the meme font'. Its ubiquity within image macros is largely overlooked, yet it contributes significantly to their structure, and raises productive questions about creativity and the balance of replication and variation in memes more generally. This article is a brief introduction to Impact – its design and its history – as it relates not only to the practice of typography, but also to the development of standards for operating systems and for the web. Impact, like internet memes themselves, tells a story of both standardization and innovation. This typeface lay largely dormant for decades after its design, but today it ensures its own proliferation through its fixed role in the production of image macros.

Keywords
exploratory creativity • image macros • memetics • software studies • typography

In 1965, Geoffrey Lee designed a typeface that followed the 60s' fashion of condensed, bold, sans-serif forms. The typeface was Impact and, as most brief descriptions of the typeface note, that is exactly what the face offers to text. Used mostly for headlines and display, it is designed to attract attention through the sheer power of its weight. However, Impact has led a more complex life than its eponymous quality suggests. Its existence has spanned several 20th-century printing technologies, it is one of the standard typefaces bundled in major operating systems, it was one of the 11 original core fonts for the web, and today it is the typeface used in most image macros.[1] One

can look at the story of Impact and see repetition and standardization, the thoughtless ease of employing programmed defaults. But one can also look at Impact, a cultural replicator, and see variation and creativity spurred on by the constructive pressure of constraints. It is Impact's longevity, and the coexistence of these two characteristics – repetition and variation – that makes it a valuable subject through which to consider memes on the internet and memes in the original, general sense as cultural replicators.

Impact's material or technological birth was somewhat anachronistic. It began as a metal typeface at a time when metal typecasting was on the decline, quickly being replaced by phototypesetting processes and by nascent digital methods. But while the technological identity of Impact might have been out of step with its wider time period, metal casting was the norm at the type foundry where it was designed. Lee, then the type director at Pembertons in London, designed Impact for Stephenson-Blake, a foundry in Sheffield that continued to produce metal type well into the 1990s, long after most print industries had shifted to phototypesetting and digital printing (Firth, 2008; Millington, 2002).[2] Impact did not make an immediate splash, as other typefaces have. Rather, the story of its popular use began almost 30 years after its design. It was not until the introduction of desktop computers that Impact came to be a commonly used face.

Typographically speaking, the early days of personal computing introduced a paradoxical expansion *and* limitation of diversity in design. On the one hand, the affordability and accessibility of design software invited new practitioners of typography. This was not a full 'democratization' of design, but certainly an expansion of access to design tools. In addition, the negligible cost of producing digital type meant that aesthetic experimentation in design was now less of a financial risk. Strictly angular and bitmap typefaces, as well as type with programmed random forms emerged from this period through the innovation of a new cast of independent type foundries. On the other hand, the practical and technological limitations of early PCs and monitors led to strict limits on the amount of detail that could be encoded in digital typefaces or displayed onscreen.

In 1992, into this liberating and yet restrictive climate, Microsoft introduced a digital version of Impact into its Windows operating system. This placed Impact in a diverse line-up of fonts that included the workhorse Times New Roman, the typewriter-style slab serif Courier, and two bespoke digital designs by the typographer Matthew Carter: Georgia and Verdana. By the mid-90s, Windows was the world's most common OS, and Internet Explorer the most common browser – a level of dominance so aggressively pursued that it would become the central point in a federal anti-trust case against Microsoft.[3] Consequently, the Windows kit of typefaces could be found on most of the world's PCs during the rise of the internet and the dotcom bubble. So in 1996, when the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) and Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF) named a list of core fonts that were recommended for web design, many of the Windows fonts – including Impact – were chosen for the purely pragmatic reason of mass compatibility.

Impact's adoption by Microsoft and the W3C/IETF enshrined the place of this typeface in the digital world at the moment of its most dramatic expansion, making it a staple in PTA bake sale fliers, word processing, websites, and now image macros around the world.

Image macros are named after macro instructions, scripts that save time and effort for a programmer by replacing a lengthy or repetitive task with a set of defined procedures. For instance, you might write a macro instruction to automatically rename a batch of files. Indeed, many time-saving features like cut and paste are forms of macro instruction. Likewise, rather than opening an image and placing text by hand, meme generators take the chosen text and set it automatically. The image itself and the style of text are largely fixed within the code of these meme-generating macro instructions. As a result, untold numbers of memes have originated and proliferated within the confines of a handful of scripts that are responsible for the structure, logic, and visual style of the image macro genre. Impact became the meme font when it was programmed into meme-generating scripts, perhaps because the programmer was looking for an aesthetic that would be loud or playful, but certainly because Impact was practically guaranteed to be in the font list of most computers.[4] An aesthetic formed; image macros multiplied, and further scripts mimicked the design choices of the original. Impact became the typeface for memes because these scripts primed it for mass replication, but a closer look at the typeface's design also suggests it is well suited to its almost accidental role in the repetitive world of memes.

As peculiar as Impact's technological beginnings may have been, its style is right in line with the time in which it was originally designed. We might notice broad stylistic parallels between the bold, sleek geometry of Impact and the revolutionary hair styles of Vidal Sassoon, or the mod fashions of Mary Quant, both informing England's mid-60s' visual landscape. Looking more specifically at typographical trends, Impact was one of at least seven bold, condensed sans-serif typefaces designed between 1954 and 1967. These faces – Schmalfette Grotesk (1954), Helvetica Inserat (1957), Placard (1958), Compacta (1963), Impact (1965), Hadrian (1965), and Metropol (1967) – are perhaps best understood stylistically as exaggerated copies of existing and popular typefaces. Just as 19th-century type designers created extravagant fat faces and slab serifs by exaggerating certain features of the popular Didone typefaces, the mid-20th century condensed bold sans-serifs were exaggerations of the austere Swiss Modern style.

After World War II, there was a push in graphic design toward an almost excessively ordered and clean aesthetic, perhaps in the hopes of combating the lingering chaos and trauma of war. This International Typographic Style, or Swiss Modernism, was characterized most by its use of grids in the layout of designs, and by typefaces like Univers (1954) and Helvetica (1957). In these Swiss typefaces, order and regularity reign. Univers was designed as an extensive type family, made up of 21 variations, each with the same x-height (i.e. height of the lowercase x), to ensure harmony when the variations are used together. And Helvetica is a face in which the variation

of shape and proportion among individual characters is minimal, again lending this face to regularity and order. In these faces, the thickness of the stroke is largely uniform, with only minor tapering where strokes meet. The counters (the 'negative' spaces within a letterform like *o*), take up a roughly uniform amount of space in each relevant character. This formal regularity creates an organized and uniform rhythm in designs, and it is this regularity that was taken to an extreme with condensed sans-serifs.

The condensed sans-serifs, which were only designed in a single weight, have thick vertical strokes, and thin, sometimes hairline horizontal strokes. If we look at the mechanics of Impact (see Figure 1) we can see that every vertical stroke is based on a thick, uniform rectangle, and each counter or combination of counters is of uniform size, again roughly rectangular. In addition, we can see that Impact exaggerates the regularity of its rhythm by employing an unusually high x-height (high in relation to the cap-height), along with short ascenders (as in *b, h, k*) and descenders (as in *p, q, y*). These dimensions, while still allowing for distinction between upper and lower case characters, assure that there is as little variation in the visual rhythm of these shapes as possible.

Some of Impact's uniformity of rhythm arises simply from the act of condensing a sans-serif. Looking at the Swiss Modernist typefaces, one might say that the dominant shape is a circle; it is the *e, o,* and the curves in the *s* or *a* that often stand out in these faces. In contrast, it is the rectangle, or a highly condensed circle, that rules over a typeface like Impact. The regularity of these rectangles, both of the strokes and of the counters, ultimately means that Impact and other similar typefaces are not useful for large selections of text. We can read Impact perfectly well, but we are unlikely to want to read even a paragraph of text in this face. This is a typeface designed for small amounts of text, brief ideas, headlines, fragments, and perhaps even punchlines.

The extreme regularity of this typeface lends itself well to the automated generation of internet memes. Because most upper case characters in Impact are basically fixed-width rectangles of color, the meme creator does not have to worry about factors like kerning or leading (the spacing of letters and lines of text). The typeface is overlaid automatically, often as a white letter with a black contour. This is a clever design decision that further enables automation. No matter what image is being used, this white type with a black contour will appear legible over any color combinations that might otherwise have obscured its edges – there is no need, then, to be concerned with the integration of this type into your specific image.

Figure 1 The regular rhythm of Impact. © Diagram by Darcy Dahl.

Across these stories of standardization – of typography, operating systems, networks, or memes – there is also a story of communication and creativity. The standardization of the core web fonts was itself a limitation that promoted communication. The very freedom of the world wide web has been dependent on restrictive dimensions: the PCP/IP protocol that mediates transfers of information online, the browser specifications that limited idiosyncrasies in formatting, and the defined set of typefaces that every browser would support.[5] The same partnership of limitation with communication and creativity is commonly found in typography. Robert Bringhurst (2004), typographer and poet, has compared the constraints of symbolic forms such as typographical shapes to the wings of a bird – constraints that enable flight. What's more, this tug-of-war between repetition and mutation is a feature of memes themselves, in the technical sense in which Richard Dawkins (1989) first coined the term. Memes copy themselves as exactly as possible, whenever possible, in the search for both proliferation and stability.

In Dawkins' work, stability – variously reflected in the fecundity, longevity, and copy-fidelity of a gene or meme – is a sign of a successful replicator (p. 12). Something that recurs widely and unchanged throughout copies is a successful feature. In fact, Dawkins argues that the differences that tend to emerge among copies are not themselves part of a meme; only that which survives unchanged is, in the strict sense, culturally replicated (p. 196). This suggests that a meme is not much of a creative thing, but perhaps its stability (or what we've been referring to variously as regularity, repetition, and standardization) lays the ground for creativity. Memes do copy themselves but, as Dawkins points out, they have strikingly low copy-fidelity compared to biological replicators (p. 194). If stability is a necessary part of memesis, and if low fidelity is a common feature of internet memes, one might ask what it is that makes internet memes memetic?[6] What is being copied?

Consider the relative stability of the two basic ingredients in image macros: image and text. There is certainly a good deal of stability in these memes, this being what allows us to recognize them as memes in the first place. But looking at the specifics, one finds a good deal of variability. While an image such as Philosoraptor has remained relatively stable, it has undergone some adaptations or mutations: different dinosaurs, the addition of a pipe, and so on. Advice Dog, which shares certain visual features with Philosoraptor, has even more mutations – a greater variety of faces sitting in the center of its rainbow-colored pin-wheel. Thinking now of an image macro's text such as 'I Can Has Cheezburger', we see that this phrase has not only been applied to other cats (and other creatures), but that it has also diversified into countless other phrases featuring subject–verb disagreement, and misplaced z's. In the midst of all this variation, if one were to survey the population of image macros, the most stable feature one would be likely to find would be Impact itself. True, not every image macro uses Impact, but this bold condensed sans serif typeface, white with a black contour, may be the most successful meme among image macros. Put another way: the

image macro, with all its meme generators and human input, is in the end merely a means for Impact to copy itself.

Impact, a mid 20th-century mutation of existing typefaces, has survived across several technological shifts. Once copied in metal type, it now ensures its own replication through operating systems, word processing software, and perhaps most effectively through meme generators and image macros. One need not determine what 'good' the copying of Impact does – replicators copy themselves for their own benefit. But it may also be that Impact's self-interest is what invites not only replication, but also creativity and mutation. Both typographical design and internet memes – though heavily standardized – are examples of what Margaret Boden (2004: 4–5) calls exploratory creativity. In this form of creativity, the goal is not so much originality as the exploration of a particular and bounded creative space. Perhaps the largely automatic repetition of Impact allows meme makers to innovate humor and ideas, even as they blindly replicate this typeface.

There are certainly historical accidents that led to Impact's revival 30 years after its design: technological factors, corporate interests, and issues of availability. But perhaps the more productive answer to 'why Impact?' is that Impact is ensuring its own survival and stability. This memetic hypothesis acknowledges that even in the programmed settings of internet memes, Impact is performing certain acts on its own, it is following its own functional logic. This typeface, in the interest of promoting its own proliferation, creates a structured space out of its shapes and rhythms, but what it cannot do is create within that space. This it opens up to us. The structure that Impact and macro instructions create is the stable ground on which creative mutation takes place.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. Image macro is the technical term for what in internet parlance is often simply referred to as a meme; the technical meaning of this term will be discussed below.
2. It seems Stephenson-Blake were able to continue the business of founding because they diversified their business to include woodworking, and other somewhat related fabrication shops. The newspaper trade unions in England also held out for some time against the new technologies that were revolutionizing publishing elsewhere.
3. Even Microsoft described its policy toward competing software as 'embrace, extend, extinguish', a crucial point used against them in *United States v. Microsoft*, when the company was found to be in violation of anti-trust laws.
4. Given that there are 11 core web fonts, being part of this set – and therefore in the set list of most computers – is not enough to explain why Impact is *the one*. A quick glance at the list of core fonts, however, provides a clearer

idea. The core fonts are: Andale Mono, Arial, **Arial Black**, Comic Sans MS, Courier New, Georgia, **Impact**, Times New Roman, Trebuchet MS, Verdana, and ▶📰 ⚒ ♥ ⓘ●■ ? (or Webdings). If we assume that the desired effect of a typeface for image macros was to grab attention, in a humorous and informal way, and to do so without requiring much design time, we can begin to see why Impact would have risen to the position. Four typefaces stand out as those that grab attention. Webdings does this, but is largely unintelligible. Comic Sans attracts attention, but not necessarily the kind you want. So this leaves Arial Black and Impact. Both have impressive weights, but where Arial Black is concerned, this weight may be the full extent of its forcefulness. The Arial type family, a copy of Helvetica, is largely neutral or nondescript; it does not have nearly as strong a character as other display faces. So while Arial Black may have weight, Impact has weight, not only in its stroke widths, but also in its proportions, in its spacing, and therefore in its character.

5. For more on the relationship of freedom and protocol, see Alexander Galloway's *Protocol* (2006).
6. Given our assertion that stability is a necessary feature of memesis, it is perhaps important to note that there are some, like Dan Sperber (2000), who argue that stability, while perhaps necessary, is not a sufficient indicator. The repetition of a form may exhibit stability without necessarily being evidence of a meme.

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