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The Evolution of Font Technology: OpenType

In the beginning of desktop publishing, Adobe created PostScript fonts. And designers said, "These are beautiful." But then Apple said, "We don't want to license PostScript from Adobe", and TrueType was born.

And then something bizarre happened: Apple and Microsoft partnered up (briefly). This partnership bore the following fruit: Microsoft was able to license and port TrueType font technology for the Windows platform.

When they made the TrueType specification public, Adobe was forced to open up its PostScript Type 1 specification. This gave both Windows and Mac OS the ability to support TrueType and PostScript fonts, which brings us to today's relatively happy status quo. But that is not the moral of the story.

Along the way, for various reasons (such as how annoying it is to install the many pieces of PostScript fonts), Adobe and Microsoft modified the TrueType technology to create a new font format called OpenType. It is the Holy Grail of font formats:

- It is cross-platform.
- All the information needed to view and print the font is contained in one file.
- It supports the Unicode specification, meaning that it can contain thousands of different characters (needed for foreign alphabets).
- It supports alternate glyphs and other high-end typographic features.
- It works in Microsoft Windows 2000, XP and Vista, as well as Mac OSX.

However, as in any good story, there are complications: Applications need to be written properly to take advantage of OpenType's typographic and Unicode features, and OpenType comes in two types— TrueType (.tff) and PostScript (.otf).

The first problem is now pretty much solved: All versions of Adobe InDesign support OpenType's typographic and Unicode features, as do Adobe Photoshop 7 and higher and QuarkXPress 7. Some other applications support the Unicode features of OpenType but not the typographic features.

And the second problem? Generally, the TrueType version of OpenType is designed for business use, while the PostScript version is designed for graphic design. Adobe has converted its entire font library to OpenType, and other font foundries are following. Both versions of OpenType can look great in print, depending on the care of the foundry. And it is fine to mix and match TrueType, OpenType and PostScript Type 1 fonts in the same document.

For more information about OpenType, visit Adobe's OpenType

documentation at www.adobe.com/type/opentype or Bitstream's documentation at www.myfonts.com/info/opentype.

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