

Recently, a student who has been with me for several terms, asked me why I so passionately despise the font comic sans. It's true; I have made it clear that the employment of said typeface generally makes me apoplectic, or, as another critic of the maligned font once said, "It makes me want to punch a baby."<sup>1</sup>

Wow. Why the hate? A fair question, and I found myself more than a little perturbed by my inability to articulate any clear rationale for the intensity of my disdain. To be honest, I should acknowledge that *any* hatred at this level requires a certain degree of being irrational. It's a knee jerk, visceral and emotional reaction. With all things aesthetic, a certain degree of personal taste plays as much a role as 'objective' formal concerns, often for reasons that are driven by emotions or nostalgia. In my case, comic sans visually takes me back to 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, and I fucking *hated* 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. And, as with any impassioned hatred, there is also a little bit of love in there somewhere. There has to be, otherwise the hatred cannot exist. The love of letterform is undertaken with great passion.

And it is true that I love to hate this little font. In fact, it is almost too easy to pick on it, particularly since it was never really intended to be a 'typeface' at all.<sup>2</sup> I'm not alone. Another student texted me recently with this exact comment, "Hey, comic sans is public enemy number one. The font is well known for its gang-related violence." The internet is filled with unbridled, joyful comic sans bashing. It is so very easy to disparage, but not without reason. Comic sans embodies two qualities that make me personally angry in the visual arts: poor visual form and generally poor execution.

To be fair, I completely understand the appeal of this friendly typeface. I get it. It's informal, it's simple, uncomplicated and, well, kinda fun. If Times New Roman and Comic Sans were actual people, I'd probably rather go to a ball game with Comic Sans. In fact, comic sans was developed as an alternative to Times New Roman by Vincent Connare, a designer who was working on a kid-friendly software package featuring a cartoon dog that utilized speech balloons for educational dialogue. Connare's typeface options were fairly limited, as there were few (i.e. none) typefaces that had a fun, informal appeal. As Connare was working on the text within the speech balloons, it occurred to him that the stuffy, authoritative feel of Times New Roman contradicted the playful, kid-friendly nature of his project. "My inspiration for Comic Sans came from the shock of seeing Times New Roman used so inappropriately."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.thedesigncubicle.com/2008/12/why-exactly-designers-hate-comic-sans/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.connare.com/whycomic.htm> Vincent Connare, creator of comic sans: "Comic Sans was NOT designed as a typeface but as a solution to a problem with the often overlooked part of a computer program's interface, the typeface used to communicate the message.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.fonts.com/content/learning/fyti/typefaces/story-of-comic-sans>

Type geeks understand the power that the form of language can wield. Typeface is the ultimate marriage between form and function, consummated almost imperceptibly by the human brain, which processes it as both a carrier of meaning and as a visual form. The visual form a typeface takes has a tremendous impact on the meaning of the words themselves, potentially reinforcing or completely undermining it. A critical problem with comic sans is that many people miss this dynamic and employ the typeface with reckless abandon (or worse, specifically ask designers to use it for real projects, which is a bit like asking a pastry chef to serve twinkies). The result is that it is used inappropriately and far too often.

Let's be clear: I'm all for breaking rules. I often *expect* my students to break the very rules I establish for them... as long as there is a compelling reason that demonstrates an understanding of (and engagement with) *why* the rule was established in the first place. With comic sans, there is often no such directive behind its usage. Recently I attended a much-anticipated lecture by a widely respected psychologist who specializes in conflict resolution and developing models of understanding violence in society. As he launched his powerpoint presentation, I was appalled to see the words "Destructive Behavior" splashed in comic sans. WTF?! It actually made me so furious that I wondered if this was some kind of Zimbardo/Milton-esque experiment to see if we would all suddenly turn violent in response to such provocation.

Would I have felt a similar response had he chosen another stylized typeface such as Papyrus or Ponderosa? Certainly, but I would not have been *as* angry (well, possibly with papyrus, which is rapidly becoming the next comic sans). The problem with comic sans is its utter banality and ubiquity. Generally, people who are not designers recognize the specificity of stylized fonts. They intuitively grasp that Ponderosa, for example, has a specific design that makes it successful in some instances and completely ridiculous in others, much like they sense that hot pink ass-less leather pants are *usually* inappropriate for business interviews. Not so with comic sans, which gets utilized as an informal alternative to the more standard Helvetica and Times New Roman. It's used largely for what people don't want (stuffy stodginess), rather than what they *do* want (something interesting and not so stuffy and stodgy). It is chosen by default and without much care to the power of a specific typeface. Informal and fun is one thing, childish is quite another.

And, yes, comic sans is childish. It is *supposed* to be childish. That is what it was designed to be and it accomplishes that task with great success. Comic sans looks perfect on a kids lemonade stand or in a child's cartoon (though not in graphic novels or most standard comic books), not so much in a college essay on slavery.<sup>4</sup> Aesthetically, I hate it in the same manner my ears detest the sound of nails screeching on chalkboard. I feel this way, in general, about *all* fonts that attempt to ape handwriting and I liken it to something along the lines of the uncanny valley

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<sup>4</sup>[http://bostonphoenix.com/boston/news\\_features/this\\_just\\_in/documents/04731913.asp](http://bostonphoenix.com/boston/news_features/this_just_in/documents/04731913.asp)

(loosely, the more human-like a robot or non-human entity seems, the stronger the sense of abject-like aversion).<sup>5</sup> It also looks and feels disingenuous. No one writes every character *exactly the same*. That's creepy, but it isn't a problem specific to comic sans. Comic sans, however, reminds me of the handwriting of certain pre-pubescent girls that is effervescently bubbling and littered with hearts dotting all the 'i's. Every single letter of comic sans is rounded off. Every. Single. One. This isn't necessarily a bad thing in and of itself, but combined with the unmodulated stroke (the thickness doesn't change throughout the letter) and awkward letter spacing, it makes for a miserable reading experience.<sup>6</sup> It is the typeface equivalent to puppies and kittens in contemporary works of art.

From a professional standpoint, the use of comic sans is a risky endeavor at best. For better or for worse, it reeks of amateur sensibilities and poor taste. Even ironic, postmodern hipster usage of it can fail pretty miserably (usually due to an overwrought sense of snarkiness and self-congratulatory arrogance which I, myself, have been found guilty of indulging in occasionally). There is a certain snobbery or elitism associated with it, just as there is snobbery associated with wine, fine art, fashion and any number of things that inspire creative passion. Graphic designers dedicate a good portion of their lives to understanding and creating form and function in visual letterform. For them, comic sans is anathema. Use of comic sans smacks of 'low-brow' and 'common'—a heavy-handed (and occasionally unwarranted) charge that can sometimes result in it being embraced lovingly as a mantle of rebellion.

To be clear, I'm actually fine with that kind of appropriation as long as *it still works formally and conceptually*, which is simply hard to pull off with comic sans. It is extremely difficult to evacuate a symbol of its cultural meaning, and comic sans is a highly symbolic letterform. It is loaded with notions of class and skill, and bears the burden of being highly stylized aesthetically (and poorly at that). The combination of those factors means that using it *well* is actually extremely difficult. Possible? Certainly.<sup>7</sup> Doing so requires a fundamental understanding of form and function, and also of the contentious place comic sans holds in graphic design culture.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/2012/07/11/health/uncanny-valley-robots/index.html>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.kadavy.net/blog/posts/why-you-hate-comic-sans/> David Kadavy breaks down the aesthetics admirably here, and also gives an interesting discussion on why there is a certain 'class' warfare surrounding the font.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.smashingmagazine.com/2009/11/11/comic-sans-history-examples-best-practices/>

<sup>8</sup> [http://bookmarkhere.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/keep\\_comic\\_fin.png](http://bookmarkhere.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/keep_comic_fin.png)