

## **TITLE**

### **Relearning Typography: Introducing a Cross-Disciplinary Typographic Framework**

## **ABSTRACT**

Current theory and vocabulary used to describe typographic practice and scholarship are based on a historically print-derived framework. As yet, no new paradigm has emerged to address the divergent path that screen-based typography is taking from its traditional print medium. Screen-based typography is becoming as common and widely used as its print counterpart. It is now timely to re-evaluate current typographic references and practices under these environments, which introduces a new visual language and form.

This paper describes a study that utilises a combination of empirical methods and action research projects to form a new conceptual framework for the understanding and practice of typography. This study is part of a Doctoral programme in the School of Design at Northumbria University, UK. This paper will describe the research carried out so far, the methodology used and the findings from two stages of the study. It will end by introducing the tentative cross-disciplinary typographic framework that has been developed to date.

This study starts by investigating the relevance of the current framework and evaluates the need for developing an alternate framework through a questionnaire survey. This is followed up by a series of interviews with practitioners working across different disciplines in an effort to identify new media attributes most influential towards the development of screen-based typography.

This study has shown that understanding and identifying the future role of typography in screen-based media is key to the developmental strategy of this typographic framework. Evidence collected in the first two stages shows that the role of typography remains the designers' main communication tool, regardless of medium. The introduction of the digital medium has not lessened

the importance of this role and has in fact increased the reliance on typography to communicate in a clear and straightforward manner.

The influence of other disciplines in the development of new media content has also been strongly supported. Conclusions from this initial research points to the fact that the development of a framework must take into account several key factors. These include the impact of technology on the development and application of typography. The framework should also be responsive to the influences of other disciplines in the development of new media content. Influences from film, computer gaming, interactive digital art and hypertext disciplines must be appropriated into the building of a new knowledge base for screen-based typography. In other words, identifying and understanding the influences brought about by other disciplines should be a major consideration in the development of the framework.

## **PAPER**

### **1.0 THE CHALLENGE OF NEW MEDIA ON TYPOGRAPHY**

The expansion of the digital medium and its divergence into many other forms of technical invention has truly transformed the way in which we live. In particular, the relevance of typography has been brought into question by the emergence of other forms of communication such as sound, animation and video. For a subject that is so grounded in the materiality of print, screen and time based environments have 'introduced a new visual language, one which is no longer bound to traditional definitions of words and image and form and place' (Helfand, 1997: p14). The role typography plays must be re-examined in light of the changes in how we read and view information via a screen-based environment.

### **2.0 PURPOSE OF THE SURVEY**

In order to identify, understand and address these new challenges, a survey was designed and carried out as part of a PhD research programme. It was designed specifically to address two key research questions:

1. How relevant is current print-derived typographic knowledge for screen-based interactive medium?
2. What factors have affected the role of typography in screen-based interactive medium?

"Relevance" refers to the value of typographic knowledge derived specifically from the printing tradition. Is it worth learning and practicing or has it become redundant in this era of digital application and display? Instead of learning principles and rules derived from traditional methods of typesetting, would time be better spent learning medium specific methods based on the characteristics of the new medium? While typography may still be considered the 'lingua franca' of a predominately text-based medium such as graphic design (Heller, 2004), its role in a multi-modal medium such as the World Wide Web needs to be re-evaluated.

The survey was divided into two stages. The first stage consists of an online questionnaire survey. It was primarily aimed at obtaining a clearer

understanding of issues held by design practitioners and educators towards the relevance and role of typography in screen-based interactive media. The findings from the questionnaire provided a definitive indicator on how much of the researcher's hypothesis is shared by the sample.

The second stage of the survey consists of a series of online interviews with subject experts in new media related disciplines. The aim of this stage was to determine which cross-disciplinary issues are the influencing factors towards the development of a new typographic framework.

### **3.0 STAGE ONE: QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY**

#### **3.1 Method of delivery**

Due to the geographical location of the targeted sample and the comparative lower level of cost, it was decided that the best way to administer the questionnaire was through the Internet. The questionnaire consisted of 25 questions, out of which all but one was closed questions.

#### **3.2 Profile of the Respondents**

Using a judgmental sample, selected participants were contacted through email by the researcher and asked to fill in an online questionnaire. A total of 182 questionnaires were completed and returned to the researcher. This represents a return rate of 26.6%.

The survey asked respondents to rate what professional design activities they were involved in. If the respondents answered that they spent more than 50% of their time in a design practice, they would be classed as a practitioner. Table 1 shows the percentage of the respondent groups, while Table 2 shows the breakdown of the principal occupation of respondents. The 'others' occupations indicated in Table 2 consisted of Typographers, Web Developers, Design Writers and Design Researchers.

Respondent Groups	% of Respondents
Practitioners	63.5
Educators	25.0
Practitioner and Educators (equal)	6.5
Others	5.0

*Table 1: Breakdown of Practitioners and Educators*

Principal Occupation	% of Respondents
Graphic Designers (GD)	29.5
New Media Designers (NM)	27.5
GD & NM (equal)	2.0
Others	41.0

*Table 2: Breakdown of Graphic Designers and New Media Designers*

### 3.3 Data Analysis

Data was analysed based on three components of data analysis as described by Miles and Huberman (1994: p10):

1. Data reduction
2. Data display
3. Conclusion drawing and validation

The researcher set up specific research questions and themes to code the collected data. The questions asked was grouped into 4 main themes:

- a. **Relevance** of current typographic knowledge and skills in Print and New Media
- b. **Role** and **Function** of current and future typography (the way type is being applied)
- c. **Influence** of the typographic element in Visual Communication
- d. **Education model** for screen-based typography

### **3.4 Key Findings**

#### **3.4.1. Principles of typography are still crucial and relevant**

There is a general acknowledgement and awareness that screen-based media brings with it its own nature, characteristics, constraints and freedom. However, most respondents view that print-derived knowledge, history, tradition and skills of typography are still crucial to the understanding and development of any type of typography.

#### **3.4.2. Type remains the main tool of communication**

There was not such strong support for type becoming a more visual or interactive element as first predicted. Designers are still inclined to regard typography as a mainly textual element used to communicate a message.

#### **3.4.3. A typographic education model that is independent of its medium**

The majority of respondents agreed that although current New Media design programmes place less emphasis on the knowledge and history of typography, they were undecided if there should be a separate curriculum developed specifically for screen-based type. However, judging from their responses from other sections of the questionnaire, it was clear that a majority would be in favour of a typographic education which begins by teaching the fundamentals and history of type before moving on to the specific characteristics and limitations of different mediums.

#### **3.4.4. There is no philosophical divide between the four main sample groups**

Contrary to what the researcher initially hypothesized, there is no marked difference in opinion between practitioners and educators; and between Graphic and New Media designers. Perhaps this is because a majority of design educators are still practitioners, who may also practice in both print and screen media. These two points may explain the more homogenous responses collected in this survey. It also provides an interesting insight into the relationship between practice and education in the visual communication field. It suggests a close relationship between the world of the design profession and design education; and dispels a common belief that the field of design

education is disconnected to the changing nature of the design profession.

#### **3.4.5. An 'extended' rather than an 'alternative' framework**

There was wide support towards the development of an alternative framework for screen-based typography. The most common view was that it should be independent on the medium of transmission, focusing first on the fundamentals of typographic knowledge, skills and function. Subjects such as film, communication, information and usability studies should be considered important elements towards the development of new knowledge for screen-based media. Rather than an 'alternative' framework, perhaps it is better to address it as an 'extended' framework in which existing knowledge needs to be appropriated and adapted to the context of screen-based type application.

### **4.0 STAGE TWO: SUBJECT EXPERT INTERVIEWS**

The findings from the questionnaire survey seemed to indicate that current print-derived typographic knowledge is still relevant for screen-based interactive media. At the same time, the respondents' answers supported the study's initial hypothesis that the construction of an alternative framework needs medium specific knowledge gained through disciplines, which reflect the characteristic of screen-based interactive media. The subject expert interviews were used to draw out medium specific issues that has and will continue to have an impact on the way typography is viewed and applied in screen-based interactive medium.

#### **4.1 Method of delivery**

Nine semi-structured (Robson, 1993), one-to-one online interviews were conducted with selected participants. The main factors that determined the delivery method of the interviews were due to the geographical location of the participants, cost and time involved. These interviews were carried out using one of the three online communication methods: Instant Messaging, external chat website and synchronous email.

## 4.2 Profile of the Interviewees

Individuals were chosen based on their specialist knowledge and interest in areas relating to the practice and theory of screen-based interactive media. The breakdown of the number of respondents from each discipline is listed in Table 3 below:

Disciplines	No. of Respondents
Interaction Design	2
Design and Media Theory	2
Digital Type and Typography	3
Electronic Literary Theory	2
Interactive and Time-Based Art	0 <sup>1</sup>

*Table 3: Interviewees' Discipline Breakdown*

## 4.3 Data Analysis

The data collected from the open-ended questions were analyzed using the grounded theory method. Grounded theory 'is a qualitative research method that uses a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived grounded theory about a phenomenon' (Corbin & Strauss, 1990: p24). In this study, the phenomenon investigated is the usage of screen-based typography. This method was chosen, as it allowed constant 'searching, comparing and interrogating the first few transcripts to establish categories that address the research questions' (Arksey & Knight, 1999: p162).

## 4.4 Key Findings

### **Influencing factors on the role of screen-based typography**

In trying to identify how the role of typography has change in the screen-based media, it is perhaps appropriate to first identify factors, which have affect this change. Investigating and understanding these factors will provide clues towards building a framework that reflects the changing boundaries of this discipline. These interviews revealed five main influencing factors:

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<sup>1</sup> Despite repeated efforts, the researcher was unable to elicit any participation from this discipline. The failure to elicit any participation could be the result of many factors, including the lack of time or the lack of interest in the subject.



- i. Technology
- ii. Characteristics of the medium
- iii. Designer's evolving values
- iv. Reappropriation of old into new media
- v. Balance between communication forms

#### **4.4.1 Technology**

A strong and recurring theme that emerged from the questionnaires and interviews suggests that the most prevalent factor dominating many issues regarding new media is, by and large, determined by technology. Typography it seems is no exception:

'Typography has always been a technology problem. It's about using the widget of the year in such a way that the eye and brain find the end results useful to look at.'

*(Excerpt from the interview with a Digital Typographer)*

It is inevitable that technology should be the main concern with regards to new media. However, one participant remains skeptical on the level of importance attached to technology:

'Technology has developed so rapidly even in the time I've been interested that certain details are already redundant. It is the opportunities offered that matter, not really the origin of those opportunities.' *(Interactive Designer)*

It remains to be seen on when this digital mode of communication becomes 'second nature' to current and future generations. Until it does, this focus on, and exploration of, the technology will still remain the main concern of designers. As such, when participants were asked what their main concerns about current web-based typography were, unsurprisingly most referred to the technical limitations of the screen medium, specifically typographic visual quality and typeface restrictions.

#### **4.4.2 Characteristics of the medium**

Three characteristics were identified from the questionnaires and interviews as most relevant to screen-based typography: interactivity, hyper-textual links and temporality. Participants were initially asked if they thought that the key difference between print and screen media is 'interactivity'. While most participants acknowledged it as a key element of new media, it is not considered to be the defining element. They listed other influential elements such as time-based motion and multi-linking capability, which should be taken into consideration as well.

#### **4.4.3 Designers' evolving values**

Precise control over typography is no longer viable and realistic in a screen-based environment. Instead designs must be flexible to allow for variation in typeface, font-size, alignment and length available in different browser software. New generations of designers and viewers are less likely to encounter 'negative transfer', which refers to interference of previous learning in the process of new learning. The framework needs to take this natural evolution into consideration and perhaps should be mindful of how it accommodates the next generation of designers and users. This is how one participant described this evolution:

'So, yes we all recycle the past whilst tomorrow's youth will create the future. We can but remind the new ones of critical areas of concern, which they will shun or embrace or edit at their will. Our job is to accept the inevitable and offer encouragement. We can continue to be a sounding board or springboard for the revolution.' (*Interactive Designer*)

#### **4.4.4 Reappropriation of old into new media**

In *The Language of New Media* (2001), Lev Manovich believes that many strategies and techniques relevant to new media design can be found by looking at the history of visual culture and media, in particular cinema. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's book, *Remediation* (Bolter & Grusin, 2000: back cover) argues that 'visual media achieve their cultural significance precisely by paying homage to, rivaling and refashioning earlier media such as perspective painting, photography, film and television.' Screen-based

typography is essentially going through the same process of appropriating (or remediating) print-derived knowledge into a usable format for screen. All participants acknowledged that this activity is inevitable as there are few direct precedents to new media. Generally, most participants believed that current designers are far too focused on the appropriation of knowledge rather than the generation of new knowledge from other parallel digital media. One participant went as far as to suggest that 'truly innovative authorship has yet to happen' and went on to predict that the future generation would eventually focus more on new knowledge generation.

#### **4.4.5 Balance between communication forms**

The primary role of typography will remain unchanged from its communicative function. The principal issue it will have to negotiate is the balance it must achieve with other visual and verbal forms of communication available in the digital medium. While type has been the sole vehicle for transmitting textual information in the print medium, the digital medium has the added possibility of employing sound, video and animation for this purpose. The balance between different communication forms will have an important impact on the way designers design for screen-based content.

'I can't imagine that language, as a communication medium will diminish. The question is: what will be the balance between oral forms (digitised audio) and verbal forms (typography).' (*Professor of New Media Studies*)

The implication of this development is that while type's main role of communication is shared out with other forms of communication, the possibility of typography embracing a non-textual role has increased.

### **5.0 SHAPING A TENTATIVE FRAMEWORK**

The results from the questionnaire and interview surveys have identified two defining pillars of the framework. They are:

1. Medium independence
2. Cross-disciplinary influence

## 5.1 Medium Independence

One of the main findings, which came out from the questionnaire and interview survey was a general consensus that the typographic framework should be independent of medium. Participants were asked to comment on an alternative viewpoint, which places a much higher emphasis on the need to understand and cater for the characteristics of screen-based media in the consideration of the framework. All participants agreed that these two viewpoints are not mutually exclusive. Instead, these viewpoints should be taken as two interlocking components of the framework.

The first component consists of a set of core-principles (set in historical, technological and application context), which are global in its applicability. While the second component consists of a set of medium-specific principles developed for application in screen-based medium. The relationship between the two components could perhaps be illustrated using different metaphorical descriptions:

COMPONENT 1 (Core Principles)	COMPONENT 2 (Applications)
Macro	Micro
Content	Container
Global	Local

*Table 4: Relationship between the two components*

## 5.2 Cross-Disciplinary Influence

The characteristics of new media have long been in existence in established disciplines such as the fine arts, filmmaking and literature. The new media attributes that are relevant to typography are generally acknowledged to be:

1. Multi-linking capability
2. Interactivity (in the form of user and system engagement)
3. Time-based motion

In trying to better understand the implications of these media characteristics, it

is perhaps best to first look at past and current communicative forms, which employ these methods. Table 5 illustrates the links between each characteristic with existing media most associated with it.

Characteristics	Media
Multi-linking capability	Hypertext Fiction, Computer Games, Literature
Interactivity	Computer Games, Virtual Reality, Interactive Art
Time-Based	Television, Film, Video Art

*Table 5: New media characteristics found in different media*

### **5.3 Discussion and future development of the framework**

The framework presented in this paper is still in its developmental stage. It is continually being refined and developed through a series of action research projects that is currently being carried out. The final definitive version will provide the basis for the development and delivery of the subject of typography within a new media design curriculum. It is designed to facilitate integrated learning of typography with other new media subjects and to provide recommendations for the application of screen-based typography in a practice-based environment.

### **6.0 CONCLUSION**

The development of an alternate typographic framework has relied on a process set out to investigate the relevance of current print-derived typographic knowledge and concluded with the identification of factors (specifically from cross-disciplinary sources) that have affected the application of screen-based typography. These factors points to an environment still ruled by technological changes and the constant cycle of knowledge appropriation. Specifically, this process has:

1. Reinforced the value of current print-derived typographic knowledge.
2. Maintained that typography continues to be one of main tool of communication in screen-based medium.
3. Identified the need for medium specific knowledge to reflect the differences between print and screen.

4. Identified new media attributes that has and will continue to influence the way typography is used in screen-based medium.

The challenge in the development of an alternate framework is not deciding what goes into it, but in trying to devise a practical application for it. The ultimate success of the framework depends on an appropriate implementation plan and strategies to integrate typographic knowledge for specific needs and audiences in both education and practice-based environment. Overcoming this challenge will be the next stage of the PhD research.

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