The Open Font Library

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A large number of redistributable and modifiable fonts now exist and are useful for all computer users. But most people are unaware of this, and have no way to easily browse and use these fonts. The Open Font Library, at `http://www.openfontlibrary.org`, is a project that aims to enable this by visually showcasing them on the web.

The project has three aims:

1. To be a website for graphic designers and everyday users to browse and download free software fonts, akin to proprietary font vendors' websites.

2. To introduce type designers not deeply involved in the free software community to it, and help them to share their fonts with the community, such as GNU/Linux distributions and TEX Live, through a single, simple process.

3. To be a central place to link webfonts from, using the upcoming CSS3 font linking technology. This is already available in webkit-based browsers like Midori, Safari, and on Android phones, and will be in Opera 10 and Mozilla Firefox 3.5.

The imminent arrival of web fonts is an important window of opportunity for free software fonts because it is where they demonstrate immediate usefulness. There will never be any question over whether a free software font can be used on the web — if it is hosted in the Open Font Library, it can simply be linked to directly.

There was a campaign to apply DRM to web fonts at `http://www.fontembedding.com`, but that seems to not have been successful. The Open Font Library is well positioned to offer advice to balance that debate and showcase what web font linking can do.

The project started in 2004 but had very little development effort on a community basis, essentially because font developers are not web developers. This means that, despite already collecting nearly 150 fonts, it did not seem like a worthwhile cause to ambitious type designers and graphic designers.

However, the long term viability of the project has always been assured since its hosting is provided by the Oregon State University's Open Source Lab (`http://osuosl.org`).

So in September 2008 I sought sponsorship to relaunch the website by hiring British freelance web developers, and brothers, Ben and James Weiner. With Karl Berry's help, TUG formed a "Free Font Fund" to take care of the administrative overheads of this effort, and make donations to the fund tax deductible for patrons in the USA. By the end of October, the fund totalled US$12,000 and patrons included TUG, the TEX-based typesetting company River Valley Technologies, Prince XML and Mozilla.

In order to raising the site's profile, the Weiners originated a totally new visual identity for the site, so that it appeals to the international graphic design community, yet without losing the inclusive free software community attitude. They also wrote compelling copy for graphic designers, explaining what the site is about. This included documenting how to contribute fonts, and the licensing issues that typically vex type designers who contribute to the free software community.

Ben Weiner customised the ccHost (`http://wiki.creativecommons.org/CcHost`) content management system as part of this work, and integrated MediaWiki to cover the site's documentation needs.

Ed Trager is an expert in Asian writing systems, and he worked hard to develop new programs that signpost what is available in the library. His 'Font Playground' is an interactive AJAX tool to generate enticing previews of each font using an on-screen keyboard that supports all major writing systems. He also developed a Unicode coverage analysis tool, Fontaine (`http://fontaine.sf.net`).

The site has been in public beta at `http://openfontlibrary.fontly.org` for some time now, and I hope that it will go live by the time this sees print. Comments are very welcome.

I would like to thank again the generous patrons: OSU-OSL, TUG, River Valley Technologies, Prince XML and Mozilla.

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