

This font has a big Impact on memes

By Todd Leopold, CNN

Updated 8:16 AM ET, Tue June 25, 2013



Story highlights

Most image memes use the font Impact

Impact was one of Windows' "Web-safe" fonts, easily accessed in Web's early days

Its forcefulness gives irony to goofy pictures, provides instant comedy

Bacon and eggs. Motherhood and apple pie. Block and tackle.

Image memes and Impact.

Yes, like those other great combinations, there's something about a photo of Grumpy Cat complemented by a caption in the forceful sans-serif font that -- to borrow from Steve Jobs, who most

assuredly was *not* talking about the subject -- *just works*.

Oh, you know what I'm talking about. Every time you open Facebook, every time you check Tumblr, there they are: photos of [newsmakers](#) and animals, [Willy Wonka](#) and [Buzz Lightyear](#), accompanied by a few sardonic words in [glorious, white-on-black, lightly bordered Impact](#).

Well, why Impact? Why not [Arial](#) or [Copperplate](#) or [Futura](#)? How did this particular typeface become the default?

Part of it is simple convenience, says Anthony Rotolo, a professor at Syracuse University who studies social media.

Impact, which was initially created in 1965, was one of the fonts included in early Microsoft Windows operating systems. In those kludgy 1990s days, Microsoft only included a relative handful of typefaces, and Impact was "the big, bold font people had, by default, in their Windows computers," says Rotolo.

Given the dominance of Windows systems and the freeware Microsoft included -- MS Paint and the like -- it was a typeface shared by millions of Windows users at a time Windows had more than 90% of the PC market.

Moreover, adds design consultant Sam Berlow of the Boston-based [Font Bureau](#), it was "Web-safe," compatible across the then-young World Wide Web. Microsoft had a set of "core fonts," which also included Georgia, Times New Roman and the much-derided Comic Sans, which would look similar regardless of the computer you were using. All of these details led to Impact's widespread use.

Boosting Impact

It wasn't long before image macros -- the graphic jokes initially passed around on bulletin boards or on e-mail -- started incorporating Impact.

Richard "Lowtax" Kyanka, founder of the [SomethingAwful.com](#) humor site, which KnowYourMeme.com credits for coining the term "image macro," remembers a distinct

progression to the current look.

"Originally, people would just post images and then, in the forums, type the text beneath it (usually because they didn't have Photoshop)," he says via e-mail. "After more and more people started obtaining Photoshop is when the image macros really began."

That was in 2000. Initially, image macro creators used Arial or Comic Sans ("usually to insult another poster directly," says Kyanka) but at some point Impact came into play.

"I believe the first time the font face changed to Impact was when somebody posted an image of a very obese black woman wearing a spandex superhero outfit, and the text just said 'DAAAAMN.' After that, everybody seemed to use Impact," says Kyanka.

Fast-forward to 2007. Software developer Eric Nakagawa was having a bad day and put out a request for funny photos. In response, a friend sent him a picture of a goofy cat from a Russian cat food commercial that had been making the rounds since [at least 2003](#). The caption, in Impact, read, "[I can has cheezburger?](#)"

That photo started the I Can Has Cheezburger empire -- and probably helped cement the usage of Impact, says Nakagawa, who has since moved on to other projects as an adviser. (Ben Huh now owns Cheezburger.)

"When I did Cheezburger, I'm sure we helped Impact's case," he says.

It wasn't just the sheer popularity of that single meme, he says, though that didn't hurt. It was also by showing what didn't work.

Nakagawa mentions that he followed ICanHasCheezburger.com with IHasAHotdog.com, intended to be the dog version of the cat-centric Cheezburger. IHasAHotdog initially used a wider font -- and wasn't as successful. (Of course, it also could have been the dogs.) On the other hand, FAILBlog, devoted to images of poor signage and general obliviousness, routinely used the word "FAIL" in all-caps Impact -- and worked.

"There are all these little nuanced things," says Nakagawa. "And it's interesting how each meme has a certain look and feel. It all has to work. When we see a funny joke, there are millions of (others) that have died."

'It's like overkill'

Why Impact works is a debatable question, but the Font Bureau's Berlow points out that typefaces aren't neutral. They have personalities, he says.

Sometimes they're obvious: The rounded, bulbous font used by [Dunkin' Donuts](#) suggests cheerfulness (and doughnuts), for example. [Comic Sans](#), as Cleveland Cavaliers owner Dan Gilbert learned to his dismay, signifies cutesiness (at best).

On the other hand, [Helvetica](#) is a subtle font, often used by brands "to make them feel like they are the standard-bearer of simple," says Berlow.

Impact, on its face, suggests boldness, loudness and yelling, especially in all-caps -- "it's like overkill," says Henry Hongmin Kim, a graphic design professor at the Savannah College of Art and Design. Combine that with photos of cats or Willy Wonka, and the contrast provokes at least a smile. (Indeed, Impact is even more effective with a 1-pixel outline or drop shadow, says Nakagawa.)

The look has now become [an established template](#), with such sites as [Imgflip.com](#), [Memegenerator.net](#) and Cheezburger's Builder making such memes automatic. Just find an image, add a punchy phrase in Impact and you're there.

The look helps us recognize the whole package as a meme, says Syracuse's Rotolo. It's a shorthand for comedy, which is useful, because the impact -- pardon the pun -- is ephemeral, he adds.

"Memes are about being in the moment," he says. "Making a meme has to be fast and has to be pertinent."

Whether Impact lasts for memes is anybody's guess. Berlow observes that the requirements that once made it obligatory -- its convenience and commonality -- are fading, now that

anybody with a font editing application can create their very own looks. His own company has created several fonts that have the same metrics as Impact.

But, for now, it's not going anywhere.

"For the most part the template will stick," says Rotolo. "There will certainly be new types of memes and there will certainly be new templates that will come from new apps that make image-sharing easier. But I think what most people are looking for is the content and the context, so the meme template is going to prevail for some time."

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