

In programming, Recursion is when a function calls itself, using its outputs as inputs to yield powerful results. Its definition contains a reference to itself.

Not only can recursion be a useful technique in coding, but it is also an entertaining concept to think about. It touches on ideas of infinity and forces the observer to shift their way of thinking. Because of this, recursion is a long-running joke in computer science. There are many recursive names for software, like GNU (which stands for “GNU’s Not Unix”) and PHP (which stands for “PHP: Hypertext Preprocessor”). If you Google recursion, Google asks, “Did you mean: recursion?”

Naming a font is hard, because the name must not clash with any existing fonts. If two fonts have matching names, they won't work well on the same computer – and there are tens of thousands of existing font families. What's more, as simple as a font name is, it has an outsized impact on the marketing success of a very complex project. Beyond all that, a font name should ideally present enough of the unique characters in the font it names to give viewers a sense of what the font is.

And so, early on in the process of this type project, I was faced with a common dilemma: what should I call it? All the good names seemed to be taken by existing fonts or by popular software projects. But then, I started wondering whether there might be some kind of “recursive” name I could come up with. “If only there were some sort of recursive name for this sort-of-cursive font for code,” I thought. “Oh hey, wait a minute....”

Recursive was a perfect name already. Yes, it was available. Yes, it used key letters from a monospace font, with the wide ‘r’ and ‘i’. And yes, it hinted at a font that was for computers, but based on human writing. But most importantly, it said something meaningful about the project itself: Recursive was used to build itself.

That may sound strange at first, until you understand the process of type design. When a type designer works on a new design, they must “proof” it constantly – usually by printing out strings of text and marking aspects that need further work. For my project, I needed traditional proofing, but I also needed to understand how it worked (and how it needed improvement) in code editors and on the web.

Something that many people don’t realize about modern-day type

design is that it’s just as much a development process as a design process (especially in new areas such as variable fonts). Complex font projects need Python scripts to facilitate design production, font building, and visual testing. Like any other form of code, this scripting is primarily done with monospace fonts in code editors.

Therefore, in order for me to understand how my font felt to use in actual practice, one of the best things I could do was to code with it. So, the output became the visual tool of input – recursion, in a sense particular to type design.

Recursive began in January 2018 as my thesis project at KABK TypeMedia, a masters degree for type design in The Hague, NL. Outside of type, my main interests in design are digital interaction and web development. Within type, one of my main interests is in variable fonts, an emerging technology that offers new possibilities for all areas of typography, with the most obvious potential benefits for the web. With Recursive, I wanted to explore how variable fonts might be able to maximize both utility and creativity on the web.

An origin in painted letters

One of my favorite styles of signpainting and brush-inspired lettering was a genre commonly referred to as casual, including both casual script (connected script from a brush) and single-stroke casual (usually all-cap, disconnected letters).

Single-stroke casual is a foundational style for signpainters because it is comprised of just a few basic strokes which are fit together to create the alphabet, and is therefore efficient to learn and to paint. Its formal qualities are designed in such a way that is deliberately non-formal and “unbalanced”: letters are somewhat condensed and have curved stems, stroke connections that are left visibly unconnected, and midpoints that are low-slung, and (usually) at a heavy slant. These qualities allow a signpainter to avoid some of the aspects of letter shaping that can be most challenging and most painstaking to achieve: perfectly straight lines, strokes that meet without separation, optically-centered spines on the letter ‘S’, and perfectly symmetrical, round strokes on letters like ‘C’, ‘G’, and ‘O’.

There are seemingly endless examples of casual fonts from catalogs from