

Do

Gender  
Neutral  
Person



Need Their Own Glyphs?

Designers are starting to claim non-binary space  
at the most basic level: the single character



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A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

As gender-neutral pronouns become more commonplace in spoken language, they haven't yet found a secure perch in written text. With the growing embrace of fluid and nonbinary gender identities in Western culture, is it time to introduce a new character on our keyboards? Plenty has been written and debated on the perceived visual gendering of typefaces

(big/heavy = masculine,  
curly/decorative/light = feminine),  
so let's focus on the basic building block of written communication: the letterform or glyph.

As writer, curator, educator, and designer Ellen Lupton famously said,

"Typography is what language looks like."

Language carries culture and typography's role is vital in shaping culture's growth.

Removing gendered language and characters from written work could be groundbreaking in the way that introducing the personal title Ms. was in the 1970s. (Fun fact: the first issue of Ms. magazine published in 1972 had an article about “de-sexing” the English language.) The new word didn’t get a glyph, but Miss or Mrs. don’t have their own glyphs, either.

There was predictable backlash from traditionalists against Ms., but it immediately called attention to gender equality in that it did not disclose a woman’s marital status, as the older titles did.

A symbol for a gender-neutral pronoun that means the same thing in any language (in much the same way that standard currency symbols do) would highlight seemingly small things like pronouns that are part of larger social constructs.



An unfamiliar character in a block of text has the power to make a reader stop and say, what is that? Why is it there? What does it mean?

It’s a visual naming, a claiming of non-binary space.

Type designers have already begun exploring how this could function at the level of the individual character.





# “Masculine always wins.”

London-based type designer and speaker Marie Boulanger wrote a book titled *XX, XY: Sex, Letters and Stereotypes* as her 2019 Masters thesis, investigating the link between typeset characters and gender stereotypes.

“The way that language is written is now a hotly debated topic in France, with a movement towards inclusive writing,” she says. “In French—a heavily gendered language—there’s a grammatical rule that says ‘Masculine always wins.’ That means that in a group of 1,000 objects where 999 of them are feminine but one is masculine, that entire group is grammatically considered masculine.

There’s a real need for gender-neutral glyphs if we collectively decide we’re not OK with having the masculine be the default for everything.”

# Bumpy



Art director/web designer Beatrice Caciotti designed the typeface Bumpy in response to research focused on the relationship between gender stereotypes and typefaces.

She drew Bumpy as a variable font to keep as much distance as possible from the gender binary perspective.

Its letterforms are designed to symbolize how human beings react differently to the social pressures and expectations that characterize the space where we live, regardless of gender.















“The role of designers is not simply in collaboration with marketing departments, which are mostly and primarily interested in profit,” Caciotti says.


“One way to start to change things is to continue to read and study other more theoretical disciplines like sociology and psychology, and to question the interpretations and effects our designs will have. We also must denounce every time something appears to be problematic or stereotypical.”

Graphic designer Sarah Gephart, partner at Brooklyn’s mgmt. design, designed a gender-neutral glyph in 2018 as an independent project. Her “hypothetical hack” was a unisex glyph that iOS could suggest every time a user began typing a gendered pronoun.

Instead of the binary-enforcing “he” or “she,” the machine could suggest a new symbol representing neither or both.



  She used Google Source Sans Pro, an open source font, as a base and programmed it to automatically replace  he and  she (and  his,  her,  hers) with  her gender-neutral glyph. Pleased with the results, Gephart wrote to Adobe type designer Paul Hunt to make sure  he was okay with  her use of his font.  He liked the idea enough to add the glyph to  his latest release of Source Sans as a discretionary ligature.

“I got help from Cyrus Highsmith at Occupant Fonts as well as from Paul,”  she says. “We emailed back and forth to change and refine the original glyph. Right now you have to choose it, but I like the idea of it being automatic, as in it just inserts itself while someone is typing.”

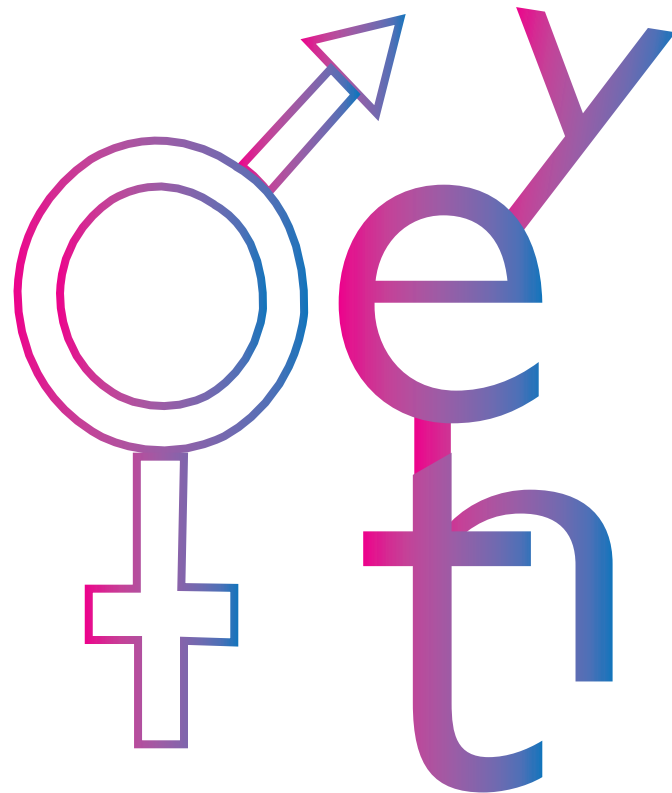
A few years ago, New York-based graphic designer Zach Bokhour developed a theoretical alphabet named Inform to make a point about visual assumptions regarding gender in letterforms; most viewers would say that Inform starts out super-manly and ends up all Barbie. He applauds the concept of introducing a gender-neutral character to our glyph palettes but notes, “Practically speaking, it’s easier to type they/them than to introduce a new glyph because they/them are existing words we’re repurposing.”

In other words, it’s easier to recycle something familiar than to ask people to adopt something completely new. Both the # symbol and the @ became associated with new meanings apart from their centuries-old ones as technological advancement created a need; perhaps another existing symbol could step in as a gender-neutral pronoun.

Viktor Freeling, a Philadelphia-based freelance graphic designer who uses they/them pronouns, remains unconvinced that a new symbol is necessary. They point out that if the design effort doesn't come from the gender-neutral community, it will simply be something imposed from the outside.

“They/them now stand in for pronouns when you don’t know what someone uses. It’s hard to see the value in making a single glyph that represents all pronouns, like looking for an easy way out,” Freeling says.

“I identify with what I have chosen, and I prefer not to have something chosen for me. If my pronouns were reduced down to just a single symbol I wouldn’t be OK with that. I stopped using masculine pronouns because I don’t want to identify as a male, and to suddenly be grouped back in with men would not be great.”



While the type world is small, the world of marketing is huge. For designers to shift the gendered language conversation within this gigantic arena, they'll need the active participation of the agencies behind the brands, as well as the acceptance of consumers and the community.

To date, advertising is doing this mostly through imagery, specifically photography. Ads now show gender-neutral and gender-ambiguous people far more often, even in super-conservative product categories like automotive.

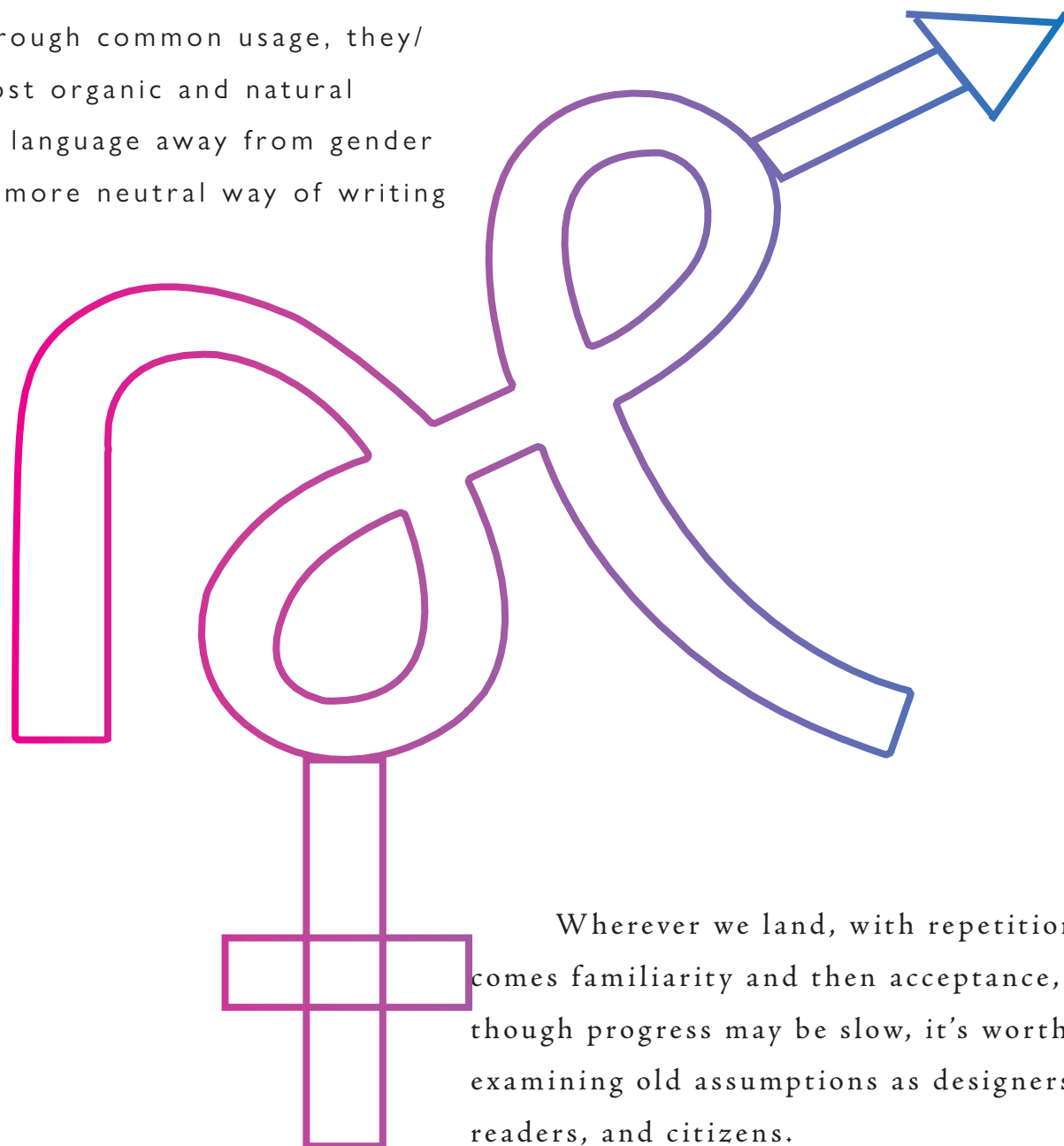
## Why hasn't type kept pace?

“The consumer hasn’t embraced it yet, but it’s not their fault. The way that expectations for type have been fed to them over the past five decades or so has been completely segmented and arbitrary,” Boulanger says.

“It’s on designers, considering the relationships we have with agencies and studios, to anticipate that the question will come up. We need to consider that our work says we are aware of how it was done before and that we’re trying to do it differently now.”

To an audience already beginning to adopt nonbinary language and ways of being, gender-neutral pronoun glyphs represent a step towards shaking up the status quo.

Then again, through common usage, they/ them is the most organic and natural progression of language away from gender and towards a more neutral way of writing and speaking.



Wherever we land, with repetition comes familiarity and then acceptance, and though progress may be slow, it's worth re-examining old assumptions as designers, readers, and citizens.

Miranda Spaulding  
Body Masculine- Gill Sans Nova, 12pt 22  
leading 170 tracking  
Body Feminine- Adobe Jensen Pro 13 pt 22  
leading 120 tracking

