Making Antarctican

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In February of 2016 designer and photographer Alistair Hall tweeted an image of a vintage luggage tag from the Peninsular & Oriental Steam Navigation Company. I was struck by the type used for the word CABIN. It was heavy and compressed with straight sides and asymmetric stroke contrast reminiscent of American wood type. I saw in it potential – the beginnings of a typeface.


Image courtesy Alistair Hall

I set about making an ultrabold font from the CABIN letters. I didn't want Antarctican to be simply another wood type revival. To make it fresh I gave the shapes a stiffer feel similar to the letters in DIN. This stiff geometry relates well to the software interfaces that have become an important part of the graphic design field. To make shapes more interesting I used deep notches in glyphs like n, b, and 6. It seems like a minor touch, but the deep notches add a sparkle that keeps Antarctican from appearing too stern.



I started with one weight that was so heavy I called it "ultrablack". After finishing the ultrablack I drew an almost monolinear thin weight. Interpolation is the process of digitally deriving a new font from two others, and the extreme fonts used to interpolate are called masters. It's the same process used in the new variable font formats you've probably read about. Filling out the middle weights required two intermediate masters. Medium and bold masters were interpolated, then adjusted to maintain stroke contrast and stiff geometry. With four master fonts I was able to build a

family of ten weights.



When I was almost finished with Antarctican Headline I decided that it deserved matching text fonts. I wanted the text fonts to feel rebellious, so I designed a monospaced typeface (all glyphs have the same width), rejecting the evenness of my proportionally spaced typefaces. I designed for text set on Retina displays now common on phones and laptops. In a monospaced typeface dense letters like M become compressed and hard to read, so I reduced the weight of interior strokes of wide or dense letters. I also added “light traps”; open areas at the tips of pointed counters, which brought the sparkle of those deep notches to other letters. To ensure the fonts also worked onscreen and in print, I proofed my work both onscreen and with my trusted laser printer.

A text typeface isn’t very useful without italics. I added matching oblique fonts for all four weights. The italics started out digitally slanted. From there I adjusted every curve to balance properly and check for rounding errors in all of the vertical strokes. Tweaking oblique sans letters is a lot less fun than drawing serif italics. But the versatility it adds to the typeface rewards the tedium involved.



With the bulk of the fonts drawn it was time to add accents for non-English languages. I wanted to expand my horizons beyond the scope of my previous fonts. I looked to Underware’s Latin Plus specification, which supports over 200 languages. I had been designing large character sets for years, but adding characters from Latin Plus allowed me to cover dozens more languages.



I didn’t stop at Latin Plus. I also added support for

Vietnamese, using Donny Trương's book Vietnamese Typography as my guide. Vietnamese uses stacked diacritical marks on some vowels, so I had to carefully balance the weight of each mark to work in single mark letters and Vietnamese. And since I'd designed stacked Vietnamese marks I also added marks to support Chinese Pinyin romanization. Designing the Vietnamese marks improved my skills designing marks, making this the best collection of diacritical marks I've ever produced.



To wrap things up I added small caps. I interpolated them using RMX Tools, software that can simultaneously scale glyphs and interpolate their weight. Like the intermediate masters, the small caps had to be checked and adjusted. After that I moved on to fractions; precomposed for the monospaced and dynamic in the headline fonts. And I designed customary f ligatures. F ligatures are unexpected in monospaced fonts, so I put them into the discretionary ligatures feature, which is off by default in software.



Antarctican is available now from Fontspring and MyFonts.