Icon fonts should have meaningful unicode mappings to provide fallback

All the icons fonts could potentially have a relatively meaningful, fallback Unicode character that would be shown in cases when the font does not load for various reasons.

'External' fonts

Ublock has an interesting option: you can turn off external fonts with it: enter `no-remote-fonts: * true` to My Rules and save it. I wanted to see how much it speeds up the browsing experience - quite a bit by the way. But somewhat surprisingly, this renders many pages unusable, like Forbes:

forbes

I don't even have a chance to guess the menu; maybe the dark blue is Facebbok, the light blue is Twitter, and the medium blue is LinkedIn, but I can't be sure. No tooltips - or at least link titles - either.

Others, since they have a text fallback, are just ugly, like Twitter:

twitter_wo_icons

This needn't be the case.

Unicode

The unicode table[^1] is big, and it has an insane amount of characters, including the relatively new range of emojis. Therefore all the icons fonts could potentially have a relatively meaningful fallback character that would be shown in cases when the font does not load for various reasons.

The best example, which I wasn't aware of till a few weeks ago, is the thing everyone now knows at **the menu button**, the three, horizontal lines. It's **called "Trigram for Heaven", U+2630, and looks like this:** ☰. It's a simple unicode character, like a letter.

So let's take the above example of Twitter:

instead of

```
 Home  Notifications  Messages
```

(U+F053, U+F054 nd U+F055 are in the "Private Use Area")

it could be:

```
⌂ Home ⍾ Notifications ✉ Messages
```

with:

- ⌂ U+2302 "House"
- ⍾ U+237E "Bell Symbol"
- ✉ U+2709 "Envelope"

or even:

```
🏠 Home 🔔 Notifications 📫 Messages
```

with:

- 🏠 U+1F3E0 "House Building"
- 🔔 U+1F514 "Bell"
- 📫 U+1F4EB "Closed Mailbox with Raised Flag"

...if they decide to roam to emoji territory.

Art with fallback

Icon fonts had been called out lately, since SVG based graphis are often a better alternative; however, if the icons have a fallback, and you may not even need to load the icon font, that's a big win for accessibility.

I've decided to test test the idea above - using fontello.com[^2] - to create an icon font set where every icon is mapped to either something similar or something that can be used as an alternative:

icon-font

It's very, very far from perfect, and some icons may be hard to guess on their own - in that cases, the context might help.

It's still better than unknown, foreign characters that might mean a thing in another language.

Footnote: the overwrite problem

Obviously this can lead to the situation where a carefully crafted icon gets replaced by a built-in emoji on certain systems, ruining the intended design.

This really is an issue, but there is a good side to it as well: it's like the native fonts - it fits. It looks like it was intended to be part of the system.

Links

1. http://unicode-table.com/
2. http://fontello.com/

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