

Design Issues When Using Flash

Introduction

Flash is a multimedia authoring tool that allows the user to create interactive websites that integrate text, graphics, animation, audio and video. The latest version, Flash, 5.0 is marketed by Macromedia as the professional standard for producing high-impact Web experiences. With Flash 5.0, designers can create low bandwidth “advanced Web applications using scripting, forms, and server-side connectivity” (Macromedia, paragraph 1). It is cross-platform and generally considered to be user-friendly in comparison to other programs like Director 7.0 since according to Delandreville (2000), for example, it simplifies the animation process. Currently, 96% of online users have the plug-in that will allow them to view flash technology (Techniquelle, 2000), which seems to indicate that it is becoming an industry standard.

The following chart, adapted from CNET Network, summarizes the fundamentals of the program.

Macromedia Flash Quick Facts	
Company:	Macromedia Inc.
Version:	5.0 (Demo Version)
File size:	10MB
Approx. download time:	47 min. at 28.8 kbps from www.macromedia.com
Minimum requirements:	Pentium-133, Windows 95/98/NT4/2000, 32MB RAM
Costs	The full version is \$399, and the upgrade from Flash 4.0 is \$149 and the educational version is \$99

For further discussion of the program Flash by Macromedia, please see Park's discussion, "Creating a Web Page in Flash" at: <http://www.edb.utexas.edu/multimedia/PDF%20files.htm>.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss three design issues, which relate to an Internet-based use of Flash: the importance of content, splash pages, and animation.

Significance of Topic

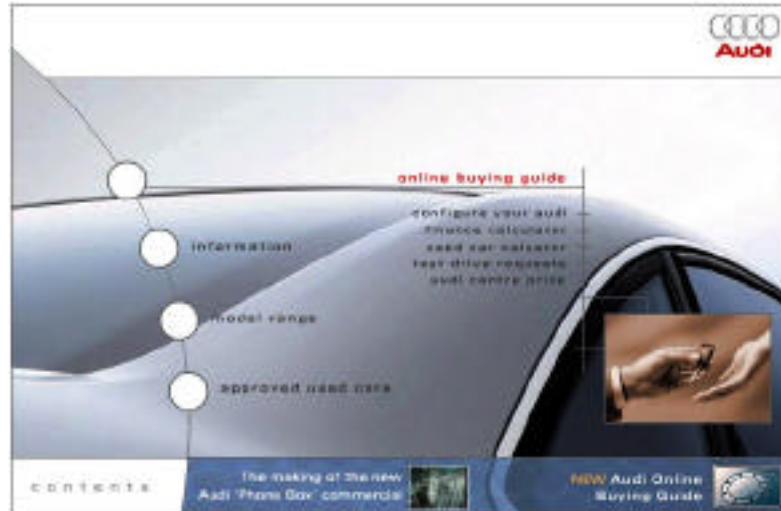
As stated above, Macromedia has marketed Flash as the standard for creating rich and engaging web experiences. This description- particularly the words *rich*, *engaging* and *experience* reveal a current industry trend that is in complementary opposition to the historical bases of the Internet. "These terms point to a blurring of the boundaries between traditional screen media and the web, and reflect the public's desire for a richer, livelier, online experience, one that melds the visual and auditory stimulation of film and television with the true power of the web: Interactivity" (Rodinelli, paragraph 1).

That is, Flash's main selling point- interactivity reflects a shift in our conceptual understanding of the Web. Mohler (2000) asserts that the Web began as an "academic-only environment", but has currently become, much like television and radio, a medium of the masses. People are turning increasingly to the Web for communication and entertainment purposes, which has opened it up to personal, corporate, and business applications. It is the context of this alteration in our interpretation of the purpose of the Web that Flash becomes most relevant. Moreover, because of the ever-increasing

number of users, advertising and marketing online have become viable options for many businesses and organizations. Thus, the desire for rich, engaging, dazzling, and ubiquitously interactive presentations has evolved into a necessity. Flash can help designers provide these characteristics to Web Sites, but along with their presence comes concerns about their implementation and ultimately, their importance.

Discussion

Mohler (2000) defines interactive multimedia as “any combination of text, graphics, sound, animation, and video that is controlled by the user and displayed by a computer” (p.296). The ability of Flash to design a more interactive Web experience is not a point of much contention; however, what appears debatable, according to Shafer (1998), is the best strategies for implementing interactivity. This is particularly important when one considers the design of the interface. Nevertheless, Mohler asserts, “...the main purpose of any publication is to educate, entertain, inform, or persuade the audience” (p.11). Thus, any interactivity created in Flash should not overshadow the intended message. That is, “Content is king” (p.14). For example, the company, Audi, makes use of Flash to create an interactive design that complements the message/attributes that they would like consumers to attribute to their car.

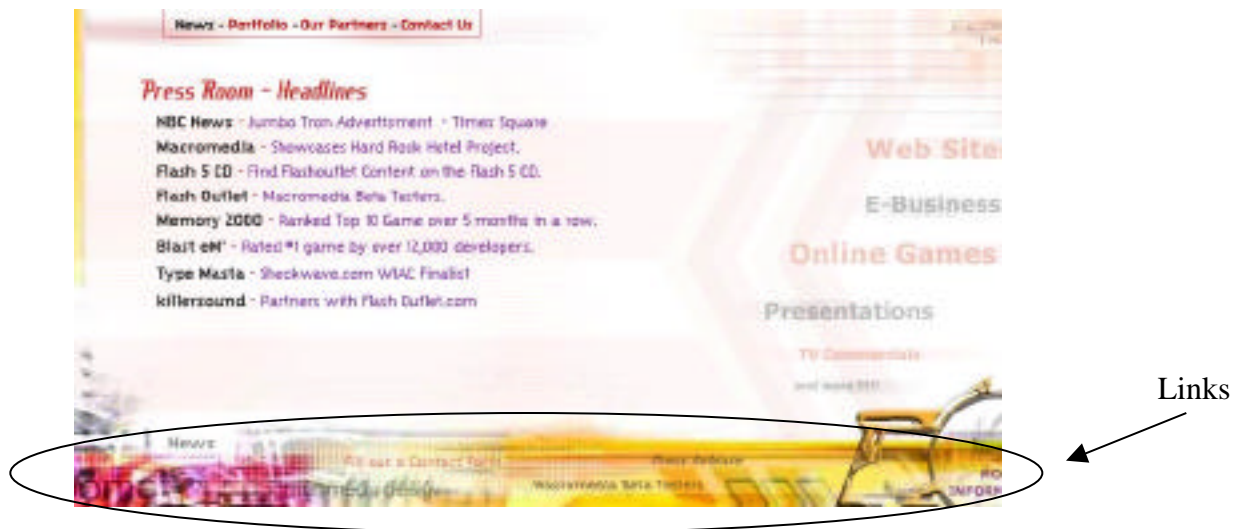


www.audi.co.uk/

In the above design, the message, our elegant cars “are the finest in equipment, design, materials, and workmanship” is not eclipsed by the wizardry of the program (e.g. text effects, graphics, sound, and animation) in which it was authored. The site merely highlights and reflects the qualities, which they feel their product embodies. Similarly, it is important for designers who use Flash to realize that “In the information age, ...people are inundated with information. When a message is... surrounded with noise, it may be misunderstood, misinterpreted, or ignored outright” (p.14). For maximum impact, a site must communicate clearly, effectively, and precisely” (Mohler, p.14).

Since the splash page is a common place for interactive elements to occur, the next design consideration that has become more salient since the acceptance of Flash is the use of the splash page. Lynch and Horton (1997) liken splash pages to book covers. “...splash screens are intended to entice users into a site- to open the book and read

what's inside. The elements presented on splash pages can “pique a user's curiosity, compelling them to enter the site and explore.” In opposition, Nielsen (2000) calls them a “sin of abusive web design” and argues that they delay the user’s ability to access the information that they desire. For example, let’s examine the site below, Flash Outlet.

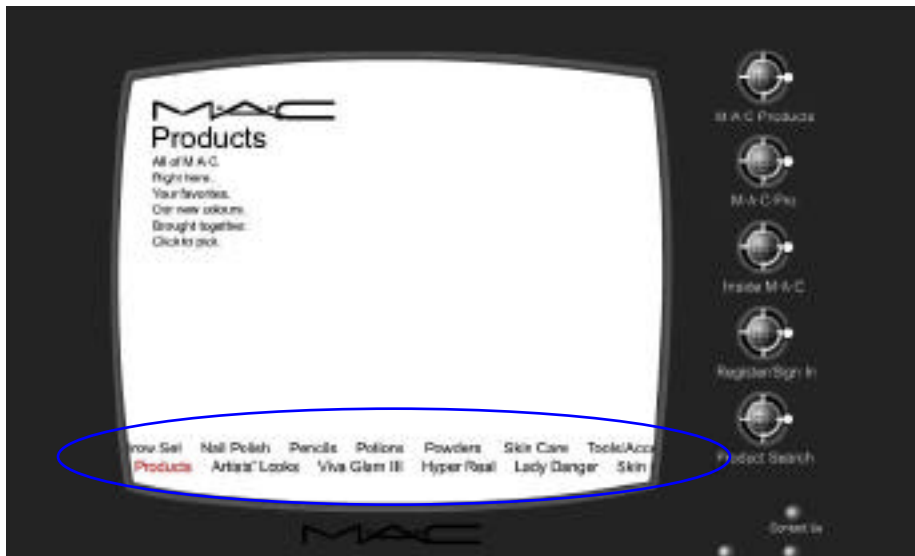


www.flashoutlet.com

A series of text effects and animation flash on and off of the screen for a full minute before the above screen appears. Instead of enticing users to stay, this may be a case where users leave before the content even arrives. Also, the links at the bottom of the page are nearly hidden by the bright colors of the design. As mentioned above, the information is subjugated by the interactive Flash elements of the design.

A third design principle that has specific relevance to Flash involves animation. According to Nielsen (1995), animation is generally considered acceptable for the following purposes: (1) emphasizing that a change or transition on the screen has occurred, (2) showing multiple information boxes in the same space (e.g. text that

appears because of a rollover), (3) to demonstrate a function, and (4) to attract attention. However, in addition to augmenting a site, animation can also clutter it and take away from the content. Nielsen suggests that designers generally stray away from including permanently moving animation since it makes it difficult for users to concentrate on the information that they have accessed. For example, the Mac Cosmetics Company uses a design interface, which includes a menu that streams across the bottom of the screen continuously.



http://www.maccosmetics.com/setcountry/home.html?COUNTRY_ABBR=US

The continuous and rapid rate at which the menu items slide across the screen makes it difficult for the user to read or select a menu item. The user can be delayed, discouraged or prevented from accessing the content of the site.

Summary

Flash is a multimedia tool that reflects the broadening of our use of the Internet from an academically-influenced display of information to an entertainment-based media host. In turn, our notions of “good” web design may be put to the challenge since, as Nielsen stated, the multitude of options provided by Flash can, at times, appear to invite a degradation in usability. In this paper, three design general design principles were discussed:

1. The content of a site is paramount and should never take a backseat to the interactive elements that can be provided by Flash.
2. Splash pages may be enticing, which is consistent with an entertainment orientation of the Web, but from a pragmatic standpoint, they may impede a user’s ability to access information.
3. Use animation in order to augment the content of your site. Never include a permanently moving animation on a web page since it will make it very hard for your users to concentrate on reading the text.

According to Mohler, the primary reason for using graphics is for content purposes. Similarly, the many functions of Flash should be used in a way that “ increase[s] attention, motivation, comprehension, and interpretation” of the content of your site (p.8). It should aid in the communication of the site’s message. Nielsen cautions that “Flash tends to degrade websites for three reasons: it encourages design abuse, it breaks with the Web’s fundamental interaction principles, and it distracts attention

from the site's core value" (paragraph 3). The author is not implying that these problems of "bad" design are inherent to Flash. He is suggesting, however, that the myriad of options offered by the application is conducive to overzealous use of multimedia elements. In conclusion, despite past, present and future innovations, the content of a site should always be considered paramount and should never take a backseat to the interactive elements that can be provided by Flash or any other design tool.

N.B. While the list of design principles discussed in this text are in no way exhaustive, they are a few basic principles, which designers who use Flash should bare in mind.

Sites Discussed in this Text

- Audi
www.audi.co.uk
- Flash Outlet
www.flashoutlet.com
- Mac Cosmetics (click on products)
http://www.maccosmetics.com/setcountry/home.html?COUNTRY_ABBR=US

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Related Links

Introductory Links:

<http://www.macromedia.com/software/downloads/>

Download the trial version of Flash 5.0

<http://www.flashzone.com/>

Flash Zone is a resource site dedicated to Macromedia Flash

<http://www.kirupa.com/developer/index.htm>

Kirupa.com: A Flash Developers Guide contains many tutorials, links, resources, downloads regarding Macromedia Flash.

<http://www.flashcentral.com/Xena3/Index.htm>

Flash Central is the source for tricks, tips, galleries, and development resources concerning Macromedia Flash web animation software.

<http://www.enetserve.com/tutorials/>

Flash academy contains tutorials that are designed for the beginner.

<http://www.moonfruit.com/>

Moonfruit lets you build your own Macromedia Flash site in 30 minutes.

Creating Interactivity with Flash:

<http://www.macromedia.com/support/flash>

This Macromedia page demonstrates how to create a popup window in Flash.

<http://www.flashzone.com/resources/clipgallery/index.html>

Flash Zone Clip Gallery gives you access to a range of stock vector artwork in a native Flash format.

<http://www.kirupa.com/developer/addbuttonsound.asp>

This page shows you how to add sound to rollovers and buttons.

<http://www.flashkit.com/resources/index.shtml>

Flash Kit has downloadable sound and music loops.

<http://www.mediawebproductions.com/sounds.htm>

Media Web Production Sound Archives offers free professional music loop samples for use with Macromedia Shockwave and Flash applications.

Examples of Sites that Use Flash:

<http://www.flashsiteofday.com/>

Flash site of the day allows you to sign up on email list to receive the daily Flash site of the day.

<http://www.stuartlittlemovie.co.uk/index1.html>

Stewart Little is a site designed for kids based on the film by the same name. The site includes games, downloads and information about the movie.

<http://www.coca-cola.com/gateway.html>

Coca Cola Website that demonstrates the convergence of web advertising to that of television of movie advertisements.

<http://www.smashingideas.com/>

Smashing Ideas is a multimedia design firm that has used Flash to design their company website.

www.mtv.com

This is the site for the Music Television Channel. They have used Flash technology to create the navigation bar that appears across the top of the screen.

<http://www.jenniferisaac.com/>

Jennifer Isaac is a free lance reporter whose portfolio has been done using Flash technology.

<http://www.drewmedia.com/>

This is the site for Drew Media, a web site design firm.

<http://disney.go.com/park/homepage/today/flash/index.html?clk=1004398>

This is a website for children designed by Walt Disney's that contains games, learning activities, and links to Disney Channel programming.

<http://www.highlanderendgame.com/>

This is the web site for the movie, Highlander End Game.

<http://www.benjerry.com/>

This is the site for Ben & Jerry's Ice Cream Company.

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