

Getting started with Flash

PART ONE



Forget HTML – you need Flash for top-class Web sites. Susannah Hall reveals all

If you've been surfing on some antique browser for the last couple of years, you might not have heard of Flash. If you're just a little more 'with it', the chances are you've been prompted to download the Flash plugin. Since you got it, you've been rewarded with fast-loading, fully-animated, colourful, tuneful and just... well, flashy sites.

But how do you produce them? This tutorial series will introduce you to the world of Flash. You will be astonished at the level of sophistication that Flash files can produce while being smaller than their HTML equivalents.

“Many designers are embracing Flash as a way of escaping the restrictions they face using HTML”

The files are small because the graphics are vector-based – Flash players render them using mathematical calculations rather than pixels. With extended the scripting in the latest version (4.0) and MPEG compression for sound files, Macromedia have taken Flash's potential up to a new level. Designers can

finally escape the restrictions of HTML.

This month we'll show you how to create animations and add some basic interactivity to a film which you will then publish. If you don't happen to have a copy of Flash around, just load up the trial version from the *SuperDisc* and get to grips with the principles of film creation.

Frames, scenes and symbols

Flash animations consist of objects that change over time. Across the top of the screen runs a timeline divided into 'Frames'. By default, when the film is played each frame

lasts one twelfth of a second but, like most things Flashy, you can easily change that. Just go to Modify > Film and change the rate of frames per second.

The first frame is always a keyframe. It's

shown as an outlined circle when it is empty and there is nothing on the stage. Each time you want to make a change on the stage, add another keyframe and fill up the time in between the changes with new frames.

You can place your animation's objects on separate layers. Each layer has its own timeline, enabling you to change one object without affecting others on the stage. You can lock and hide the layers, making it easier to modify objects on the stage without accidentally

changing other elements. It's a good idea to clearly label your layers so you don't get confused about what each layer contains.

We'll create our film in two scenes. Scenes run one after the other automatically, with each new scene starting a new timeline. Splitting your film into scenes helps to avoid excessively long and confusing timelines.

ON THE WEB

On-line flashers

Find out more about Flash and see some excellent design at these sites

www.macromedia.com/software/flash
Your starting point – with a gallery of good flash sites.

www.etalentagency.com
Excellent animation ideas on this site.

www.cymbic.com/broadband.htm
A smart clean design with some great Flash features.

www.flashcentral.com
A handy site for tutorials and developer's information.

www.flashzone.com
Another handy site for tutorials and general information about Flash.



SEE OUR **SUPERDISC**

Try Flash 4 – it's on both discs as a trial

MOVING PICTURES

Using a motion guide in animation

Make your objects animate a long path

In Flash you can move an object across the stage either using motion tweening or by creating a step-by-step animation. Neither technique is suitable if you want your object to run along a more complex path. You can achieve this by actually drawing the path you want your object to follow and defining it as a motion guide.

Start by right-clicking on the layer with the symbol you want to attach to a path and select 'motion guide'. Make sure the 'Motion Guide' layer is selected and use the Pencil tool to draw the

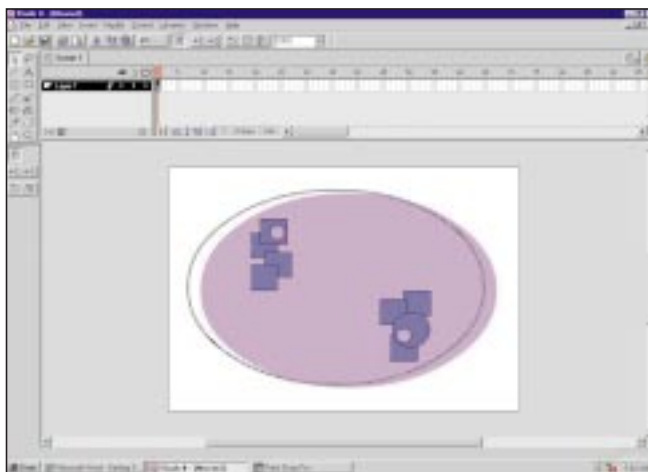
path your symbol will follow. Once you have finished, smooth your path out by selecting it (double-click on it) and click the 'smooth' button at the bottom of the toolbar. You can also reshape the line by deselecting it and dragging segments with the mouse.

Once you have finished select the Layer with your symbol on and click and drag your symbol up to the beginning of the path. When you pick up the symbol click near the crosshair denoting the centre point of the symbol. You will know you have clicked in the right place if a circle

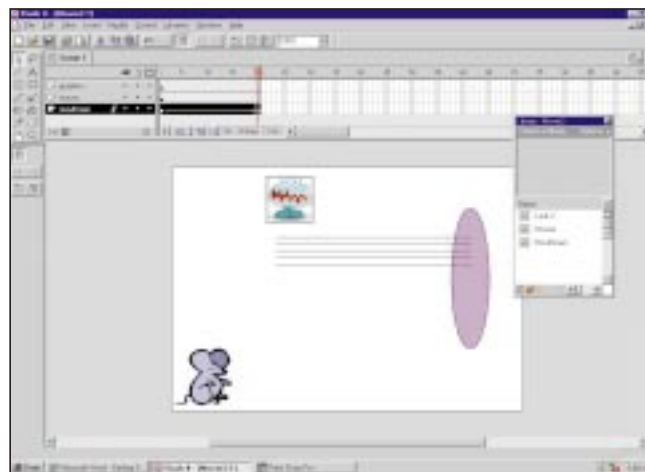
appears in the middle of the symbol. You need to snap that circle to the start of the guide.

Add a keyframe where you want the animation to end and insert a frame in the same place on the Guide layer. Select the end keyframe, pick up your symbol in the same way and snap it to the other end of the path.

All that remains is to right-click on the first frame and select 'Motion Tween', double-click the first frame to display the Frame Property dialog box. Then check the 'Orient to path direction' box in the tweening section.



The stroke and fill on objects you draw in Flash are separate. To select both at the same time double-click the fill.



You can only create a motion tween using one object per layer. The object should either be a symbol or be grouped.

Although you can draw or type directly on to the stage, it is best to create graphics as symbols. You can reuse them as many times in your film as you want, but when the film is played they are only downloaded once, streamlining your file.

Create a symbol by selecting 'New Symbol'

from the Insert menu. The screen changes to display a separate work area where you draw or type the symbol. Then move back to your film and the symbol is stored in the Library palette. When it is added to the stage it becomes an 'instance' of the symbol. You can change the size and rotation of an instance.

Double-clicking on it displays its properties, enabling you to make adjustments to its colour and transparency.

Tweening and interaction

The simplest type of step-by-step animation is built up by placing an object on the stage and adjusting it with every key frame. However, it is much easier to get Flash to fill in the intervening steps between two instances of a symbol using Motion Tweening. The two instances can be different sizes or colours, have different levels of transparency or be in different positions on the stage. Place them in separate key frames with several frames separating them, and apply a motion tween to the first keyframe.

Animation is fine, but it wouldn't be the Web without some interaction. To start to add interactivity to your film, create some buttons. Buttons are symbols with four keyframes representing the button's 'up', 'over', 'down' and 'active' states. The active state indicates the area where the mouse will respond to the button and by default is the same area as the 'up' state.

As symbols, buttons can be used over and over again, with actions set up for each in the Instance Properties. You can also attach actions that will control the entire film to a frame using the Frame Properties.

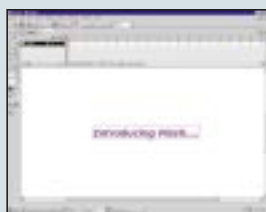
Once you have finished your film you can publish it as a Projector which creates an .exe file (either for Mac or PC) which will run without the Flash player. Projectors are best for distributing your film on floppy disc or CD.

For the Web you can publish it as a .swf file which is automatically generated with an accompanying HTML file. The .swf file will run within the HTML file in any browser that has the Flash player loaded as a plug-in. **PCP**

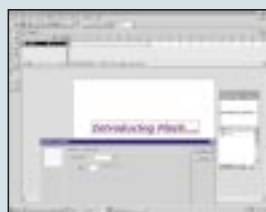
WALKTHROUGH

Creating your first film in Flash

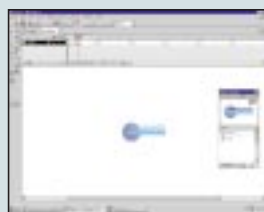
Learn the basic principles of animation and interactivity in Flash



1 Start by creating the text. Go to Insert and select 'Create Symbol' and choose a graphic symbol. Use the Text tool to add your text and then click the Scene 1 button above the layers on the left. Display the Library palette from the Window menu.



2 Drag the text symbol on to the stage from the Library palette. Right-click in frame 40 in the timeline and add a keyframe. Select Frame 1 and double-click your text. Under Colour Effect adjust the Alpha to zero. Right click Frame 1 and choose 'Motion tweening'.



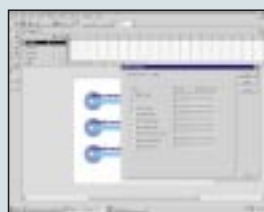
3 Create a new symbol, but this time make it a button. Use the drawing and text tools to create the up state of your button. Add a keyframe for the over state and adjust your button.



4 Return to Scene 1 and add a Scene from the Insert menu. Drag your button from the Library onto the stage and double-click it. Under 'Actions' select 'Get URL' from the '+' menu and type in the URL you want the button to link to.



5 Place additional buttons on new layers (use the 'Add Layer' button under the list of layers). Add an 'Actions' layer and double-click the empty keyframe. Under 'Actions' select 'Stop' to make the movie stop and wait for the viewer to click a button.



6 Check your movie works by selecting Test movie from the Control menu. Then go to 'Publish Settings' under the File menu and choose the file formats you want Flash to generate when you publish. Then click the 'Publish' button and you're done!

NEXT MONTH

Next month we'll show you how to add some more advanced interactivity and animation using film clip symbols and other actions.