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Flash 101, Pt. 1 - Learning Layers

Flash is a software program that has gained a lot of popularity in the past couple of years. The serious web designer uses it to create amazing animated, sound lush and graphic intensive "movies" within the websites they build. Several versions of Flash have surfaced, with the most recent version 5 topping the lot of them with its versatility and applications. Flash is not an easy program to learn, but if you wish to stay competitive as a designer, you will take the time (and expense!) to learn it. This article is the first of five to introduce you to the complexities and capabilities of this wonderful program from [Macromedia](#).



There are several components used in this program that must become familiar to you before you can create a Flash movie. The most basic of these are layers. Any designer who has worked with graphic programs like Adobe Photoshop, Ulead PhotoImpact, and so on, is used to working with layers. Layers are, in essence, invisible sheets that stack one on top of the other. This component is how various graphics, text, and so on can be arranged to flow around and on top of each other, creating interesting animations. In Flash, these layers are how you organize the flow and character of your movie - the graphics, the text, the sounds.

Layers Upon Layers

When you first initiate a new movie, you begin with one layer, Layer One. In the keyframe- timeline control panel this Layer is visible as Layer 1. Getting used to using layers helps you to take advantage of the intricacies of Flash. Most designers use a separate layer for each main component of the Flash movie. Thus, each sound, each graphic, each title or sentence, each button has it's own layer. Organizing components according to layer makes editing and revising much easier. With this program, you want to learn as many shortcuts as possible. It is easy to edit one layer without interrupting any other layers.

Add layers to your control panel by selecting "Add - Layer" on the toolbar or clicking the "+" sign at the bottom of the screen. Each layer will be numbered consecutively, "Layer 2", "Layer 3" and so on with new ones arranged on top of the original layer. These raw titles, "Layer 2" can be renamed to clarify the contents, eg "Circle" or "Temple". To rename a layer, simply double click the text and type in the new name for the layer - make it meaningful and representative of the layer content. As you are working, you can also choose to have all layers visible or select only the one you are working on, or a combination of layers. You can also rearrange the position of your layers. Remember, the layer at the

top of the stack will be in the foreground. Similarly, the bottom layer will be in the background of your finished movie.

Appointing a Guide

A special kind of layer, a guide layer is used within a Flash movie to help keep all of the layers and objects in their rightful places. To turn a layer into a Guide layer, right click on the layer and select "Guide" from the popup menu. You'll notice that the icon before the layer name changes to a Guide Layer one. It's easiest to put your guide layers at the bottom of the layer heap to prevent mixing them up and to help you feel in control of the movie. It can get very complicated working with several layers at once.

Guide layers are very useful for creating tracks for your images to travel along. For instance, you can create a guide layer in the shape of a circle. This circle can be used as a circular track for say, an image of an airplane to zoom around. It will also help you to time a sound of a buzzing plane to match the animated graphic.

Know Your Mode

Layers come in four unique modes. Each mode is symbolically represented within the layer's section of the timeline control panel. The four modes include:

Normal mode: All layers are in this mode when nothing is being done with them. They simply sit and are ready for action when you want to work on them.

Current mode: When you are working on a layer, it is in current mode. You can identify this mode by the symbol of a pencil beside the layer name. As well, the layer's name will be indicated in bold text.

Locked mode: This is the mode to use when you wish to protect a layer's content - it prevents you from altering the contents. Symbolically, it can be identified by the little lock to the right of the layer name. You lock and unlock a layer by clicking on the dot beneath the lock symbol, within the layer's area.

Hidden mode: This is the mode to use when you don't want to see specific layers as you work on another layer. Symbolically, this type of layer is identified with a big "X" next to the layer name. You can make a layer visible or hidden by selecting the "eye" symbol dot within the layer's area.

There are many components to learn when using Flash, but getting the basics of layers down pat is a wonderful first step. Experiment with layers - practice moving them around, changing modes and creating guide layers. Remember, practice makes perfect! And Flash is an excellent program to list on your resume and add to your portfolio. It's certainly worth the effort to learn. Layers are a logical place to start.

Links

Flashkit at

<http://www.flashkit.com>

Macromedia Flash at

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

Layers Tutorial at

<http://www.virtual-fx.net/tutorials/html/layers.htm>

Working with Layers at <http://www.scripts.nl/Flash/layers.asp>

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