

# TRY NOT TO BE TOO FLASH

**IF YOU ARE CONSIDERING USING FLASH ANIMATION ON YOUR WEBSITE, CONSIDER THIS: WILL SITE VISITORS SEE IT AS WEB POETRY IN MOTION OR A PAIN IN THE ARSE? DAVID MAIDA INVESTIGATES WHETHER YOU SHOULD BE FLASHING IN PUBLIC?**

*Flash, ah, saviour of the universe.  
Flash, ah, he'll save ev'ry one of us...*

Actually, that 'saviour' would be Flash Gordon, the scantily-clad superhero who saved Earth from the evil Ming the Merciless. But Flash, the popular authoring software developed by Macromedia, is arguably as influential – in cyberspace that is.

If you've ever seen a Web page with animation, a slide show or video, then chances are you have seen Flash in action. It's simply an application design software used to create dynamic (moving) content.

"We use Flash to add an element of interest and movement to our home page [www.doc.govt.nz]," said the Department of Conservation's website supervisor Elizabeth Marenzi – undoubtedly expressing the thinking of many. "Hopefully, it will catch the attention of some users who mightn't ordinarily be interested in the topic and get them to click through for more information."

Hopefully.

Macromedia began selling this software in 1996 under the name of Future Splash. It's come a long way since it first started gracing everyone's 'intro screens' – something of an embarrassing hallmark of the early days of the Internet. That was a very poor use of the technology and still something which gets up the nose of usability expert, Trent Mankelow.

"The intro screens, which you don't see too much these days, are just a silly idea," said the director of Optimal Usability. "If you put these kinds of barriers in the way of people getting into a site, they are going to click away when they have to jump through hoops in order to just get the information that they are after."

As the interactive director for Saatchi & Saatchi worldwide, Tom Eslinger reports that 70 to 80 per cent of the websites the company creates have a Flash component.

"We don't do a lot of work which is static," he admitted, "so the only way to really add quite a lot of energy to it – and animation, sound, graphics and that

sort of thing – is using Flash. It's the most compelling way to do dynamic animated advertising."

And that it is. Just as long as it doesn't "get in the way", as Mankelow puts it.

"People have gone a bit too nuts in terms of being too creative, creating all these fancy ways to navigate and fancy ways to show content which basically make it less usable for a person just trying to find out information," he added. "People can go mad with the use of the technology and not really think about how others will use it."

Flash seems to be a big temptation for all designers to pull out all the stops and go over the top. One reason might be that it's not a particularly easy tool to learn to use. So when people do get the hang of it, it can be a huge distraction and people sometimes take their eyes off the ball.

"Where you've got navigation that basically goes away from the user's mouse, you put your mouse over one of the navigation elements and it crawls away from you; so that is exactly what I'm talking about – that's an extremely poor use of Flash," added Mankelow.

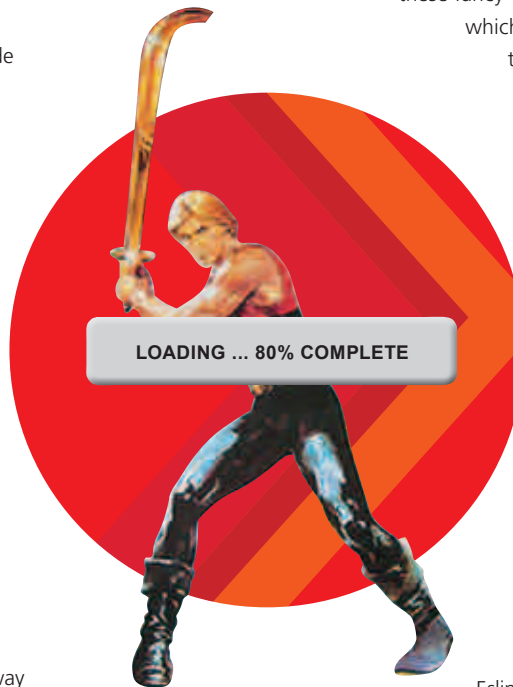
Eslinger is a big fan of the concept but would tend to agree with these criticisms.

"Everybody is guilty of having a new toy and taking it out of the box one time too many. I mean everybody. Flash 8 is just out and so now everything you see is going to have flicking motion blurs on it; and you know whatever different tool comes out, everybody starts using it."

Matthew Lewis has been using Macromedia's Flash products in small doses with his clients. He is the Webmaster at Big Fish Creative and finds one of the big drawbacks is cost.

"It's extremely powerful but it must be used correctly and it is generally quite expensive purely because of the time it takes to create these wonderfully animated sites."

A good Flash developer will cost more than a typical Web designer as it is a



complex application – with a mix of design, animation and programming – that requires a good level of experience to be competent.

“Flash is much more than a simple design tool with a bit of animation thrown in to create visual effects and at its core is ActionScript, which is a programming language unique to Flash,” said Lewis. “As such, it is difficult, or uncommon to find a person who can be good at both; so often you will need a small team of designers and developers to really get the best out of Flash.”

So, what’s the cost of Flash creation services? As a rule of thumb, you can get ‘bad’ Flash for \$10 per hour, ‘good’ Flash for \$80 to \$200 per hour. A good banner ad will take two to four hours, a full site can take a week and up.

Of course, while it’s possible to create small Web animations that are relatively cheap to build and in reach of most Web designers, you will generally get what you pay for.

A good way to utilise Flash for the smaller sites is to create components, like banners, ads and site headers, that are separate to the site and enhance it visually without compromising search engine optimisation. A site intro Flash page should be avoided as it will only be an expensive ‘skip intro’ button and will only serve to dilute any search engine rankings.

Lewis also warns that the end-user may not find the site as enjoyable as the designer.

“It’s a whole learning process for the end-user and while it might look funky and everything, it can actually be quite impossible to use for people who don’t have the same level of knowledge.

The consensus is that Flash is better suited to an entertainment-type business than serious business. And there are plenty of good examples.

“I think ones that are purely informational don’t necessarily fit,” said Mankelow. “If the main way that people are getting to information is to be browsing and clicking through things – a lot of government websites probably wouldn’t be suited to it.

“You see smart uses of Flash at places like XTRA, MSN, and the Department of Conservation where they use Flash if the person has Flash installed and it goes through a series of stories or a series of photos. But if the person hasn’t got Flash installed, they will just see the one image. You can’t actually tell. You wouldn’t know that you were missing out if you didn’t have Flash.”

As a Web developer or designer, if a client just comes right up and says they want to have a Flash website, Mankelow believes red lights should immediately start flashing.

**“People have gone a bit too nuts in terms of being too creative, creating all these fancy ways to navigate and fancy ways to show content which basically make it less usable for a person just trying to find out information.”**

“The first step is to take into account the audience you are designing the website for. Why would it be that they are coming to this website? What do they want to do there? And understanding some of the demographic details. I would definitely be worried if the client said, ‘oh we are doing it this way’.”

However, Eslinger is convinced that when used in small doses for animation and used correctly, Flash can be quite effective.

“For one of our clients, we’re working on relaunching their site and we’ve got Flash elements in the pages but they are pretty small. And you know from research and looking at their audience that a lot of them are still on dial-up and they’ll be going to the site to get product information about nutritional information, recipes, that sort of thing. So you don’t really want them to have to choke down a big giant Flash file.”

While being a government site with strict accessibility rules, DOC’s Marenzi sees part of the organisation’s role as inspiring people, “capturing hearts and not just heads with our message of protecting and restoring our natural and historic heritage”.

“Small elements of multimedia can be an effective way of doing this,” she said. “Some people just like a few bells and whistles to draw them in, while others just want the cold, hard, black-and-white facts as quickly as possible. We try to balance the way different people use the site and, hopefully, give everyone what they need.”

Given the potential slow load times, awkward navigation, poor user dexterity, difficult accessibility, high cost and gaudy animations, you might not want to make a decision about Flash off the cuff. But as an alternative to a flat static computer screen it may be just what you are looking for.

*Flash Flash I love you*

*But we only have fourteen hours to save the Earth. ■*

[DAVID MAIDA IS A FREELANCE WRITER LIVING IN AUCKLAND]