

Flash 8 - First Impressions? More of the Same

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I know it's a pipe dream but I'm still waiting for Macromedia to create a flash IDE that caters to programmers. For once I'd like to see an equal number of enhancements for those of us writing functional "UI" flash as opposed to those writing pretty flash. There are so many weaknesses to the programming interface of Flash that's it's hard to know where to start. The "actionsript panel" is still practically unusable. I am compelled to use a mouse almost constantly, and the help panel has only a tiny improvement (the search box stays put in the upper left). There are few if any enhancements for folks like me. Here's the list from the "what's new" panel.

- *Gradient Enhancements* - Wonderful. I'm sure all my business clients will be thrilled to know that they can get a more nuanced look to buttons and form elements, and it will be smoother (whoa hoo!).
- *New Object Drawing Model* - You'll be happy to know that you can now draw shapes on the stage that do not affect other shapes on the stage. My 11 year old son is excited about this because it will cut in half the time it takes him to complete the bouncing ball tutorial.
- *Script Assist Mode* - That should allow me to discard my "action script for dummies" book and save room on the shelf. Seriously, how about putting more effort into the help section instead? I don't need hand-holding - just good resources and real "big screen" editor. **Septy Actionscript Editor** is *light years* ahead of MM on this front.
- *Expanded Stage Work Area* - I'm not positive I even understand this "enhancement". Does this mean the enlarged the area around the stage? I suppose to increase the flight time of objects flying in from off the stage eh?
- *Macintosh Document Tabs* - Actually, this is a nice enhancement. Good job MM.
- *Improved Preferences Dialog Box* - I like this too. The old preference dialog box was a bit challenging to understand. The new one is improved (at least that is my first take) and better organized.
- *Single Library Panel* - I wouldn't call this an "enhancement" so much as a "correction of an oversight".
- *Improved Publishing Interface* - I'll take their word for it. Once I set these I rarely go back and look at them again except to deselect or select "omit trace actions".
- *Object Level Undo Mode* - Oooh... this is actually an *excellent* enhancement. I never thought of it, but I like this approach. However, since I do pretty much everything in Actionscript, it's not going to be life changing.
- *Custom Easing Controls* - Great, now all those tweens I do will look better. Oh wait....
- *Graphics Effects Filter* - Seems interesting. I'll have to wait and see I guess.
- *Blend Mode* - This is cool. Using this mode I can play Jeff Goldblum in "The Fly" and mangle one object with another. That should come in handy.
- *Bitmap Smoothing* - This makes bitmaps on the stage look nicer. Thanks MM, I didn't even realize how much that was bothering me!
- *New Video Encoder* - We'll wait and see on this one.
- *Video Alpha Channel Support* - Excellent! Every 5 months someone says to me, "You know, I really want that effect on my web page where this spokesperson walks out onto the page and starts talking". This could make that a lot easier to

do. Now if I can just get them to double the project budget.

Obviously this is all tongue in cheek. I love flash and we do a lot of UI work in flash using remoting and/or web services. I have come to the point where I don't expect too much of the fine folks at Macromedia when it comes to the flash IDE. It's obvious that the folks who program the IDE are exposed to only 1 kind of flash programmer - the person who *actually wants* to take full advantage of all that cool animation stuff.

Unfortunately, there are many folks for whom all that edgy, cool stuff is like the Camaro they had in their teens - cool and sexy, but impractical and expensive to maintain. Most people do eventually matriculate from James Dean to Jimmy Stewart. Not everyone's target demographic is under 30. As for us? We are only interested in Flash if it helps us deliver on the business goals of our clients - mostly that means productivity enhancements, automation, intuitive UI design and the like. Flash shows great promise for all of these at the display level and we use it often. But we have been working with flash for years and rarely needed a "tween". Many of our applications have a single frame - just 1. I used to be embarrassed to admit that.

A typical Flash Application

Let's take the steps for what I would consider to be a typical flash application for myself or one of my team.

- Open a new flash document.
- Put the needed components on the stage - grids, text input boxes, checkboxes, combo boxes, call-outs, tips, message areas, dialog boxes, etc.
- Move them to different layers, or sometimes I do a "forms" application where groups go on different screens.
- Open frame 1 and add `#include "someScriptname.as"`
- Open Sepy Actionscript editor and create the file I want to include.
- Start programming my application

From that point forward the Flash IDE is really just a compiler. Pretty much everything else is done in actionscript (formatting, populating the objects, adding event listeners etc.).

Profit Margin and Flash

Why not leverage all the bells and whistles? To be honest, the quicker I can get to the actual *heavy lifting* of the application the better my return on the project. Using the approach above I'm still about 15% over budget on time compared to HTML, but I'm closing the gap. That means to do a comparable form application in Coldfusion and HTML (as apposed to Coldfusion and Flash) takes me about 15% less time. I can usually charge a bit more for a Flash application and keep my margin steady. But it brings up an important point. Flash programming is more time consuming than HMTL/Coldfusion programming. I must be able to justify *to my customer* why it's important to use it. For many applications this is pretty easy. It's faster (no page refresh) with a more intuitive UI.

If Macromedia could create a Flash IDE that was more programmer friendly I could shave a bit more off of that difference and make it an even more viable choice. I'm looking for an IDE that is capable of *getting out of the way*. I don't want "script assist". I want a great big actionscript editor that is smart enough to create tips on the fly (did I mention **Septy**?) and has context sensitive help (did I mention Homesite?). To date,

however, Macromedia has chosen to add bells and whistles that only appeal to "visual" users. Are you listening MM?