



Working with Flash – a first look

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Introduction

Flash is the best known and most used animation technology on the web. It is also used to make titles and 'i-dents' for TV and video, many sorts of games, work in conjunction with database information, and create whole comic animations. It began life as Macromedia software, but was bought by Adobe in 2005. The current version of Flash is CS3, shipping with the Adobe Production Suite. Common versions used are also Flash MX and Flash 8.

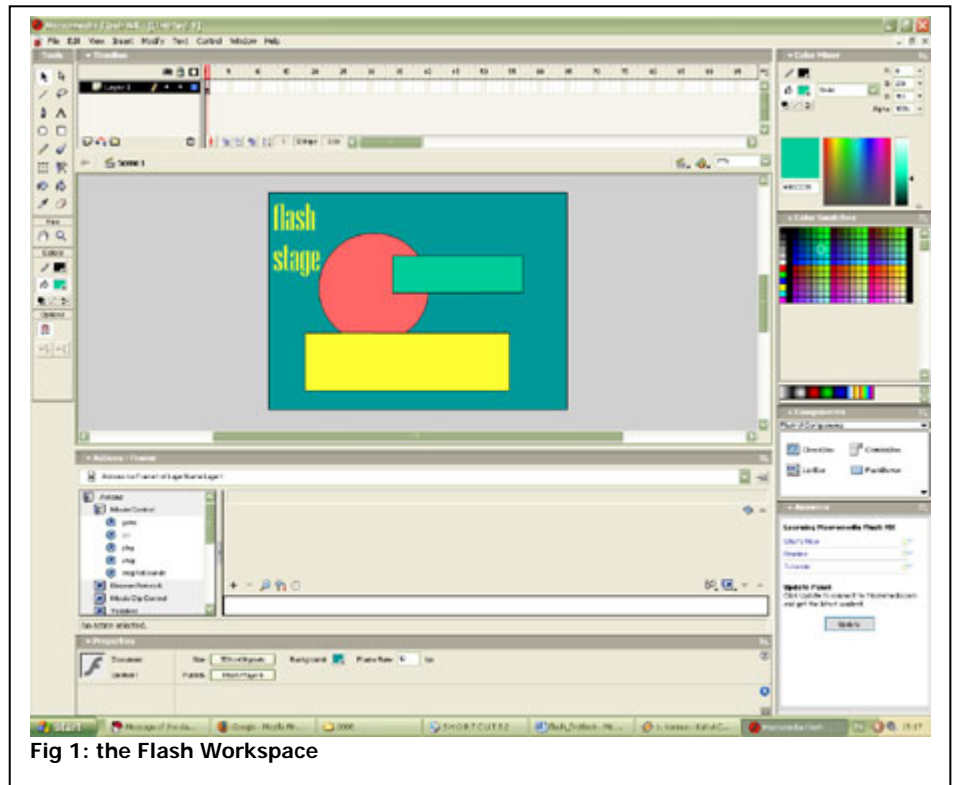
Flash is a *timeline* software – a program that uses frames over time to make things happen either in a linear way (you watch it like a video) or interactively, as in, you make things happen with your mouse, by clicking on buttons or images.

What does Flash Make?

Flash publishes .swf and .exe files. For more on this see 'Publish Settings'.

Flash swf files are generally viewed within web pages and can be played on any PC or Apple Mac that has a flash player installed in its web browser.

Flash exe files are made for either a PC or Mac and can be played without the need for a web page.



The workspace

The workspace consists of a Timeline, the Flash Stage, an Actions window and a Properties window. On the left hand side are several tool palettes, usually including colour swatches and mixer, component tools, an answers help box, and/or several others like the library or the scene chooser.

The workspace is completely configurable, so you can lay it out the way you prefer. You can also save the panel layout and call it up from the windows/panel-set menu.

The Flash Stage

The 'stage' is where you place things to be included in your Flash. Everything you have on the stage will be in one or more layers (see below for more on layers). All the layers in the timeline are seen in the Flash when it is published, even if they are 'turned off' in your workspace view (clicking on the eye will turn them off and on, just like in Photoshop PSD layers).

The stage is configured in the properties window, which is accessed by clicking on the stage. The stage properties will then be displayed in the properties window. The size and background colour, as well as frame rate are configured here. We can choose any frame rate we want, but the standard frame rates are best - 12, 15, 24, 30. In general there is little need to change the frame rate from the default setting of 12 frames per second. It is fine for most simple Flash animations.

The Timeline

The timeline consists of frames and layers.

Layers in the Timeline

Layers are created as and when needed. Layers can be placed within folders (like layers in a Photoshop PSD), and can be named and renamed as required without effecting what is on them, or the resulting Flash swf. Layers are visible topmost down, like a PSD. Layers can be used for masking and also creating movement, as well as placing items in the timeline.

Frames in the Timeline

Empty frames are shown as white segments. Frames with 'items' in them are coloured grey. Keyframes (more later) have small black dots in them. Usually you must select the frame (or frames) you would like a function to take place on.

- To create more frames (repeating the content of an existing or empty frame), press F5.
- To create a keyframe press F6
- To create a blank keyframe, right click and select 'blank keyframe'
- To clear a keyframe, right click and select 'clear keyframe'
- To cut/copy or paste frames, right click and select as appropriate
- To remove frames, right click and select 'remove frames'
- To clear frames (without removing them), right click and select 'clear frames'
- To covert to key frame, right click and select...

Actions window

The Actions window is situated below the Flash Stage, at the lower end of the workspace display.

The actions window is ONLY for the script you attach to symbols and frames. Scripts are used to make things happen. Flash uses 'ActionScript', which looks a bit like JavaScript, but is not quite the same.

Properties window

The Properties window is situated below the Flash Stage, at the lower end of the workspace display.

Properties in Flash are much like properties in Word or web pages. They control things like size, colour, depth, attaching sound, colour effects.

The Menus

Not everything is covered here, use the 'help menu' for that! Some main functions and features are listed, to help get you started.

From 'File'

The important things to note here are the *import* and *import to library* and also the *publish settings* and *publish* selections.

Publish settings

When you publish your .fla (the Flash file you are working on), you make a .swf file. The publish settings allow you to control how you publish this, and to publish more than just the .swf file. For example, an html page, a QuickTime movie, jpg and gif files, and an .exe file (also known as a Projector).

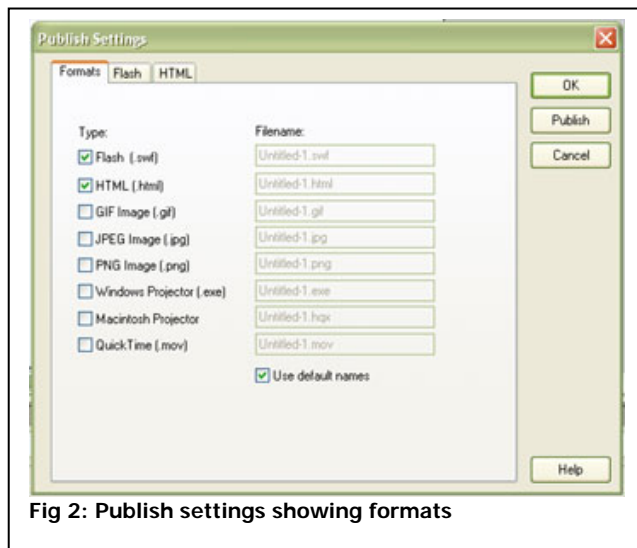


Fig 2: Publish settings showing formats

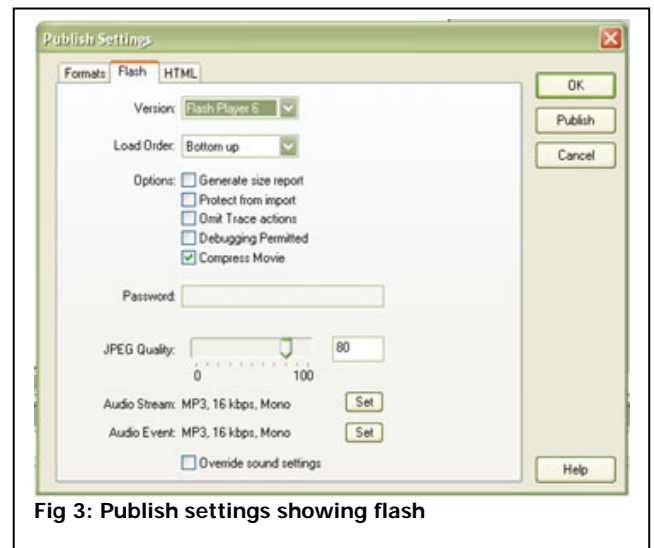


Fig 3: Publish settings showing flash

To publish any of these other formats you must use either the publish button in this window, or File/Publish. To publish just the .swf file you can use Ctrl/Enter (or Control/Test Movie from the Control Menu).

Import & Import to Library

Import is used for importing things into your Flash. They can be imported straight onto the stage or into the Library (see Window/Library for more info).

From 'Edit'

Most things from here are accessible via right clicking at the appropriate time/place and are mostly concerned with frame editing.

Copy and paste (and paste special) are here, along with paste in place, possibly one of the most useful features of Flash designing. To access paste in place by right clicking (once you have copied whatever it is you want to paste) then click anywhere on the stage on the layer you want to paste into, and right click, select 'paste in place'.

From 'View'

You can select *guides, grid, rulers, snap to guides, snap to grid and snap to objects*. All these tools give you more control in building very exact design templates. Experiment with these features, and choose what works best for you to aid in neat and precise development.

From 'Insert'

Another way of inserting frames, keyframes, layers and layer folders. Also insert motion guides here. (This can all be done by right clicking on layers or frames, as appropriate.)

From 'Modify'

The most interesting things to take note of here are *break apart* and *modify bitmap*. In Flash 8 this is seen as *trace* or *swap bitmap*.

Break Apart, also known as rasterizing, means you can break apart, or flatten text fonts. This allows you to treat them as graphics, not fonts – very useful for effects and shape tweening.

Swap and Trace bitmap very different things. *Swapping a bitmap* allows you to replace open image with another from the library in exactly the same position. *Trace bitmap* allows you to convert jpgs or gifs into vector images. In basic terms this breaks the image apart into lots of colour areas that can be selected separately.

You can modify a lot of other things too but I won't cover them all here.

From 'Text'

The main text tools are also available from the properties window and offer the usual things – font, colour, style, size, alignment etc. you can also select text to be scrollable here.

From 'Control'

Play – this plays the timeline but DOESNOT publish the movie

Rewind – this rewinds the timeline – useful if you have a very long timeline

Test Movie (Ctrl/Enter)

Test Scene (Ctrl/Alt/Enter)

Debug Movie (more advanced and not necessary for beginners)

Mute sounds

From 'Window'

Here you can choose just what you want to see in your workspace. All the main menus are listed here, along with some other features like Scenes, Reference (descriptive help), Accessibility (usability features) and Common Libraries (other assets provided as is by Flash).

THE LIBRARY

The most important palette for developing your Flash is the library. All your assets are kept in the library. They can be stored in folders, for tidiness, and names can be changed at any time without altering your resulting Flash published files.

The Library can also be accessed using F11, though this may vary with versions of Flash.

Fig 4 opposite shows the library with 2 graphics symbols, a movie clip symbol and button symbol inside it (see below for more on Symbols).

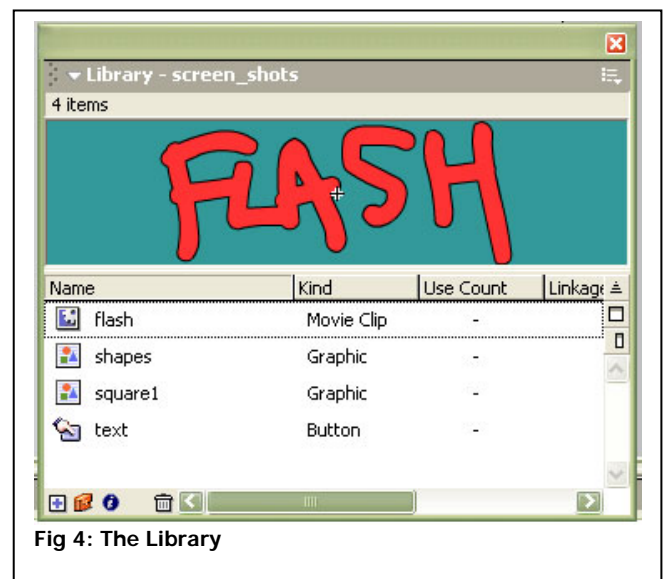


Fig 4: The Library

Tools

Left hand Toolbar

The main toolbar on the left offers all the main drawing and selection tools you will need ready to hand. Note the similarity with some of what you see in Photoshop and Illustrator.

The image on the left shows the tools as they appear in Flash MX. They may differ slightly in Flash 8, but are pretty similar. Going from the top, we have:

Tools

Arrow tool / Subselection Tool

Line tool / Lasso

Pen tool / Text tool

Draw circle tool / Draw Square (or rectangle) tool

Pencil Tool / Paintbrush tool

Transform tool / Fill Transform Tool

Ink Bottle Tool / Paint Bucket Tool

Pipette Tool / Eraser Tool

View

Hand (Move about) / Zoom (Enlarge or shrink in view)

Colors

Stroke Colour

Fill Colour

Swap colour from front to back

Options

These tools change depending on the tool you have selected from the set, so you may get brush sizes, stroke alteration options, marquee selection choices, or other choices. They are like more options on any given tool you select.

In the image opposite the options show some brush options, and the padlock that 'locks' a gradient fill across your stage.... (This means the same gradient fills anything you draw, not just a single shape.



Fig 5: Toolbar

How do I start making a Flash file?

Rule 1 - Symbols

Anything you import/draw/make should be converted into a SYMBOL. This is a graphic, a button or a movie clip. Unless an item is a symbol, nothing can be done to it without causing problems later, or worse, total meltdown.

Rule 2 – Test, Test, Test again

Always test your movie, all the time. Do not wait until you have done a lot of work before you test (Ctrl/Enter). This will save a lot of time later if you come across bugs.

Rule 3 – Save, Save, Save again

Always save your Flash file as you are working. Do not wait until you have done a lot of work before you save it. Flash has unlimited undo (well, certainly many undo's) so you don't need to worry about that. Saving the file will not alter the amount of undo's you get.

Rule 4 – Save lots of .flas for back up

If you have a lot of changes to make, do not do them all on the flash file you are working on, save to a new file. This way you have backed up your work and will safeguard what you have already done should anything go drastically wrong. Believe me, it's worth doing – we have all lost days of work through a major problem with a .fla, and not having a back up file.

Recommended Websites, Books and Tutorials

Flashkit.com
Tutorialized.com
Actionscript.org

Curtis, Hillman (2000) 'Flash Web Design – The Art of Motion Graphics'. New Riders USA
(Classmark: 006.7869 CUR)

/ P Lister, 2008

