Web Design Planning for Flash Designers
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Abstract
Proper planning before beginning to design a website is a necessary step to ensure desired outcomes. Unfortunately, beginning designers lack the experience to properly plan out a web project while seasoned veterans of web design often regard these steps as unnecessary. This paper provides a thorough planning paradigm which will be helpful for both beginning and experienced web designers.

Introduction
One of the most often overlooked parts of web design using *any* technology is the planning stage. Just like any other design-intensive project, neglect during the planning phase of a Flash website could result in delays, re-do's, and client dissatisfaction down the road. These steps may seem trivial to experienced web designers, but they're a necessary part of any professionally designed web project.

Phase 1: Goals
Let's face it, everyone has a web site. And those that don't have websites want one. In this mad rush to get a website, many people forget to focus on a very important underlying question... "What do I want my website to do?"

Websites should have a purpose: a purpose other than proving that a company is sophisticated enough to have a website in the first place. When you are contracted to design a website for a client, you should ensure that both you and the client are familiar with what the website will accomplish. You do this by defining goals. Some clients will be well-equipped to define their own goals, and others will need your help. Here are some of the typical goals of high-profile websites:

eCommerce
Any company with a product and a merchant account is a potential eCommerce website customer. eCommerce sites exist to sell a product over the internet.

Portfolio
Any company that brokers a service is going to want a portfolio site. The services vary, and include consulting, design, web development, architecture, landscaping, and countless others.

Information-Based
Companies and organizations with a need to communicate and distribute information in a low-cost format is a match for an information-based site. These clients typically include government organizations, nonprofit groups, and academics.

Portal
A company or organization that seeks to put its patrons in contact with other resources and information media needs a portal site.

Goals can be grandiose or meager. The goal of a locally-owned restaurant may simply be to provide location, hours of operation, a downloadable menu, and daily specials information, while a national clothing manufacturer will no doubt want to be able to showcase and sell their products online with a secure account management system.

The bottom line is that both you and your client should understand and agree on a website's goals before you begin to design. There are several reasons why this is an important step:

Helps You Make Intelligent Estimates
First and foremost, you deserve to be fairly paid for your web expertise. Defining goals with your client before submitting your final proposal allows you to better estimate how much time and resources you'll have to invest in the project. This means that you'll be able to make intelligent estimates of how much the website will cost your client and will ultimately help ensure that you'll be fairly paid for the work you do.

Helps You Better Make Technology Decisions
One of the major critiques of Flash is its tendency to encourage gratuitous designs and animations. Identifying a client's goals will help you determine if they even *need* Flash. If all their goals can be met with traditional HTML, you must consider eliminating Flash from your tool set for that particular site. In other words, If Flash is a technology that will aid your client in meeting their website's goals, by all means use it. If not, lose it.

You must also identify which other technologies will be needed to meet the client's goals. For example, a site requiring account logins and sophisticated animation will need Flash for the animation as well as some database technology such as SQL for the account management. You should consult with a developer in order to determine if the technologies needed to meet certain goals are compatible. These problems are much easier and cheaper to address before a site goes into production.

Protects You, the Designer
Another reason that you should define goals before beginning to design is that it helps protect you as the designer in the event that your client changes their mind during development by adding, removing, or changing the goals of the site. With clearly stated and documented goals in the beginning, the client is more likely to acknowledge the financial burden of making changes during the development process.

Helps You Determine the "Geek" Quotient of the Project
Clearly stated goals can help you determine if you need to enlist the help of developers and other web geeks. You'll most likely be able to develop a site with basic coding and scripting needs, but more complex code might require you to subcontract specialized type of web developer. Again, this is much easier to address before the design process begins.

It's Just the Professional Thing To Do...
All these reasons aside, defining goals is just a professional practice. It makes for better websites and you're in the business of making better websites.

Phase 2: Site Mapping
After defining goals, you are faced with the daunting task of bringing a website from concept to reality. The toughest part is often just getting started. To make things a little easier, a site map is the essential next step.

A site map is literally a list of every page on a site and how they are linked to one another. For the purposes of planning a website, we're going to take that a bit farther. A site map should include all of the following information:

A Diagram of Each Page and How They are Linked
First, you should design a diagram of each web page and how they're linked to one another. Put simply, start with your main page and determine what links you want on the main page. Then determine what pages those pages will link to and so on and so on until you've sketched out the entire website .

A Summary of Each Page's Content
After building the schematic of your site, you should determine what content lives on which page and write a summary for each page. Include information such as what copy will appear on a page, what specific images or types of images will appear, and so on.

A Description of How To Get from A to B
Each time you link to a new page within your site, you must determine what technology you'll use to make that transition. In HTML, you'll most always use the <a href...> tag to create a link. In Flash you have a host of different options including loadMovie and getURL. Using JavaScript, you can pop up new windows and control certain aspects of those windows that traditional HTML does not allow for, such as size, presence of address bar, presence of scroll bars, etc. Making these decisions early reduces the possibility of technological shortcomings during the design process.

Let's examine each of these steps and why they're important.

Diagram of Pages
The diagram of pages is the first time you'll have to think about how to organize a site's content. There are three basic types of web site organization:

Linear
Linear sites are like slide show presentations. Typical navigation includes forward and back buttons and sometimes skip to beginning and skip to end buttons. Linear sites are easy to design with Flash... you can sometimes fit an entire linear website into one flash movie, making each frame on the main movie's timeline a single "page" of content and using nextFrame and previousFrame commands for navigation (Chandler, 2000).

Hierarchical
A step up on the food chain are hierarchical sites. Most modern websites are hierarchical. You start out on a page with a main menu and you make choices from that menu. Depending on which choice you make, you may encounter new choices, or submenus. Hierarchical Flash sites require more complex navigation and menu systems and usually rely on loadMovie and getURL statements to access sublevel content (Chandler, 2000).

Relational
Relational is a final type of site construction that you don't see much of these days. Relational links are hyperlinks, and take you to content that's related to the content you're already viewing. This type of construction is often found in large text-based documents and reference material. You'll use it only sparingly in most Flash projects (Chandler, 2000).

Using one, all, or any combination of these website construction methods, you'll need to organize and diagram your website. As you diagram, make an effort to simplify the organization of your content as much as possible so that your navigation systems will be more intuitive. When all is said and done, every piece of content that you'll be including on your web site should have a home somewhere inside the diagram of pages. This is an essential step because it helps you define your web project in tangible terms. You're now looking at your project as the sum of its parts which will make designing and developing a matter of divide and conquer.

Summary of Content
This step helps you further refine and organize your web site. By summarizing the content that each page within your diagram will house, you'll be able to identify pages that can be consolidated, or pages that need to be added to your diagram in order to accommodate all the content.

This step also helps you begin the daunting task of content management. One of the most common problems that arise during web development is a lack of communication between the designer and the client about content management. Designers assume that clients will provide all content and clients assume that designers will generate content. The accepted practice is that clients should be expected to provide content and designers should be expected to mold it into formats that fit the design. This step allows you as the designer to create a summative list of all the content needed to fill out the site. This list can be compared to any existing content and you'll then know how much content needs to be generated for the website. Since we're still in the planning phase of the site, it's easy to approach the client and talk about who will be responsible for generating the needed content. Most likely, some copy will have to be written, and additional photography is often needed. Let the client decide how this content will be generated, and make sure that they understand it will come at an additional cost if they decide that you should generate it.

Getting from A to B
After defining and summarizing each page in your site, you should then determine how to get from one page to another. This is an important step because it forces you to think about the underlying construction of your site for the first time. In this step you'll make decisions about technology. How will the user be transported from the main page to the level 1 links? Will HTML's <a href...> tag suffice? Will you use Flash's loadMovie to load external shockwave files onto movie levels, or will you use getURL to take the user to unique web pages for each visited link? Should you use JavaScript to activate a popup window or will the target attribute of the <a href....> tag or Flash's getURL's target window feature work just as well? These are questions that are entirely relative to your specific web site's construction and you should definitely tackle them before you begin prototyping.

Summary
A site map is a plan. It's a blueprint. The more detailed, the better. It's foolish to start any web project without some sort of site map, and taking the time to develop a detailed site map will ensure that your final product is well-organized and user-friendly.

After developing a site map, it's always customary to present it to your client and have them approve it. This ensures that the website you're soon to start developing matches the vision of the website that your client has had in their head all along. And once again, it protects you from having to perform time-consuming restructuring and re-organizing of a site at the last minute.

Phase 3: Concept and Approval

With goals defined and a site map under your belt you can begin working on a visual concept for the site. Start with sketches on paper and work until you have three well-developed concepts (Dinucci, 2002). Take these concepts into Photoshop and make layerd Photoshop files. Resist the temptation to jump right in and begin building your site in Flash. With your three concepts roughed out in Photoshop, present your ideas to your client. Don't be frustrated if the client does not pick your favorite concept. Listen to their opinion about each concept and decide if there are ways you can improve your concepts without compromising the design. Some clients will want to pick and choose parts from each concept, which is a bad overall design choice. Be considerate but firm, letting them know that each design has it's own integrity which must be maintained. If the client does not like any of your concepts, ask for specific reasons. Often, it's something simple like a color scheme or a font choice. It is ultimately your job to guide the client to a good design choice that fits their needs, so don't be afraid to tell them if they are making bad design choices. In the end, a final concept should be approved by the client before you begin developing a site.

Conclusion

With concept approval, a site map, and clearly defined goals, the only thing standing between you and a great website are your skills and abilities as a designer. Get to work!

References

Dinucci, Darcy. (2002), *Adobe Master Class: Web Site Redesigns* (2nd ed,), Berkeley, California: Peachpit Press.

Chandler, Scott. (2000), *Multimedia Studio*. Blacksburg, Virginia.