

Flash back, Flash forward

by Jenny Carless

Flash back to 1996: Websites were static. They had primitive means of engaging a viewer — just basic mouse clicks and hyperlinks — and they were largely inaccessible to users with disabilities. Then came FutureSplash Animator (the precursor to Flash), a vector-based animation and drawing tool.

Flash forward to today: Flash Player is installed on nearly 98% of Internet-enabled desktops. The world's leading websites are largely global, interactive, and engaging. And authors have the necessary tools to support accessibility. From content to games to applications, virtually anything is possible today, and this is largely due to the power of Flash.

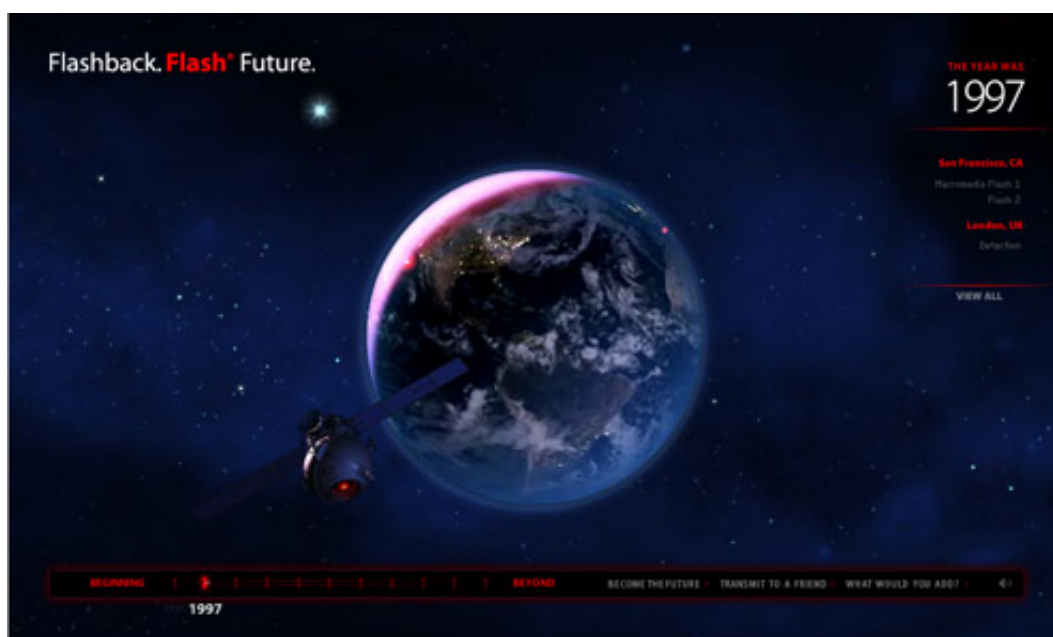
Flash's influence reaches far beyond the Internet — to mobile devices, consumer electronics, and more. "Flash runs on everything from desktop computers to refrigerators," notes Mike Downey, senior product manager for the Flash authoring tool. "Just about anything with a digital interface can run Flash." For example, the Jaguar XK4's single-screen delivery of audio, navigation, climate control, telephone, and vehicle settings is all powered by Flash.

Adobe recently celebrated the tenth anniversary of Flash. Long established as the tool of choice and recognized as an industry-leading application, Flash — with its creative toolset and unique interactive capabilities — is at the forefront of design, enabling designers and developers to create engaging, interactive websites and mobile content. It's also the tool interactive content creators can count on to help them stay at the top of their profession for generations to come.

It all starts with an idea

"We thought that since you can draw with a pen on a piece of paper you should be able to draw just as easily on a computer." That's how Jonathan Gay, one of the original architects of Macromedia Flash (with Robert Tatsumi) and considered by many to be the forefather of multimedia and interactivity on the Internet, describes the genesis of the now ubiquitous program.

"From that idea, Flash was born," he says. "But I was just one of the engineers — it's all the developers and designers who have created such fantastic content with Flash who have made it the success it is today."



Flash anniversary timeline

Flash was first introduced to the developer community in August 1996 as FutureSplash Animator by a company called FutureWave. It gained popularity quickly, and Fox, Disney, and Microsoft were among its early adopters. By November of that year, Macromedia was impressed enough to buy it and then released it as Macromedia Flash 1.0.

"Macromedia Flash was a revolutionary product built around an extremely small and efficient vector graphics engine," explains Downey. "It allowed for beautiful animation and interactive graphics with a very small download size, and it became a central Macromedia product as well as a key Internet technology."

A complete ecosystem

Today, Flash is truly ubiquitous. Users include interactive web designers and developers, graphic designers, video professionals, educators, and students; and Flash Player consistently reaches 80% penetration within 12 months of each new release.

Beyond a set of authoring tools, Flash is a comprehensive ecosystem of related products installed on more than 600 million Internet-connected PCs and mobile devices worldwide. Flash reaches the enterprise with adjacent products like Flash Media Server 2 and Adobe Flex 2 software. It touches millions more on mobile devices with Flash Lite and FlashCast mobile authoring and development tools. And Flash Video delivers customized, seamless online video experiences to millions of users worldwide.

Flash appears on the websites of [Ford Motor Company](#), [ABC](#), [Sony Pictures](#), and many other leading corporations. In fact, ABC recently began streaming hit television shows on its website the day after they air on the television network.

"It's really significant that a global broadcasting powerhouse like ABC/Disney is extending its business model like this," notes Jim Guerard, vice president of product management for web and video. "ABC/Disney is leading the industry in understanding that the Internet isn't just about advertising — it's an entirely new way of broadcasting."

Flash is used on everything from sites that offer edgy, immersive experiences like [Red Bull Copilot](#) to one of the oldest (but still most popular) animation sites, [HomestarRunner.com](#). It also provides an entirely new way for people to communicate and build communities and networks through social networking sites like YouTube and MySpace.

Increasingly, leading interactive designers are also using Flash to deliver engaging interactive experiences beyond the web — to mobile devices.

"The key success factor for Nokia is a great user experience — the so-called 'wow effect' that we have in our mobile devices," says Christian Buchbauer, alliance director of technology platforms at Nokia. "Flash, with its great user and graphical experience and expressions, is one of the key factors for us."

Did you know?

- More than 65 million Flash technology-enabled mobile phones and consumer electronics devices (such as televisions, media players, set-top boxes, digital billboards, cameras, educational toys, and car navigation systems) have shipped worldwide.
- The Flash authoring tool has an installed base of more than two million users.
- NBC, ABC, MTV, and other major broadcasters have standardized on Flash for streaming video.
- Approximately 98% of Internet-enabled PCs have Flash Player (more than Adobe Reader).
- Approximately 70% of Fortune 100 companies have Flash content on their websites.

The secrets of success

What are the secrets of Flash's phenomenal success? There are several key factors, according to those at Adobe who know the product set intimately.

Guerard sees three important reasons: the program's small size, its unique interactive nature, and the continuous innovation the Flash team delivers.

"Providing an environment where you could have rich media on the Internet that was very lightweight, both in terms of the file size and the player size, was revolutionary," he says. "And Flash was — and still is — the only way to have a truly interactive experience."

"We've kept up on the pace of other technology advancements and listened to our creative customers to bring out the best in Flash," he continues. "This is what keeps our team going."

To those three factors, Mike Downey adds key distribution deals. "Early on we leveraged the success of Netscape Navigator and subsequently Microsoft Internet Explorer to gain worldwide adoption almost immediately," he explains.

Looking forward

In the past decade, the face of the web has changed dramatically due largely to the power of Flash in making interactive content not only easy to create but also easy to access. Flash has inspired a new generation of design, from static websites to highly interactive and engaging media.

Today, rich media is becoming the dominant force of design. And Flash will continue to lead and inspire the future of interactive design — not just on the web, but in mobile, video, and beyond.

[◀ Back](#)

Jenny Carless is a senior writer for ROI Communications and frequently writes for Adobe publications.