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## INTEROFFICE MEMORANDUM

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**SUBJECT:** SOME CONSIDERATIONS WHEN USING FLASH FOR WEB PAGES  
**FROM:** OFFICE OF WEB COMMUNICATIONS, IDAHO STATE UNIVERSITY  
**DATE:** 7/11/2007

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### OVERVIEW

Flash was originally designed for animation and interaction, but it has been expanded in use to allow everything from motion graphics to video communications. It is a popular Web tool because of the combination and use of vector graphics, reusable shapes and small file and plug-in sizes. "Flash" includes files authored in Macromedia Flash (.swf), as well as the player platform.

Flash is most commonly used on web pages for: art and motion graphics, animation, splash pages and intros, ad banners, interaction and navigation, and video and audio players.

Flash is what its name suggests: flashy. It provides a lot of visual stimulation, but it should not be used to communicate critical content or navigation of your site. Keep this in mind as you consider using Flash in your web site.

### DISADVANTAGES

Perhaps Flash's biggest downside is that it is image-based. This leads to some major limitations:

- No page or scene within a Flash movie can be bookmarked or linked.
- Site visitors cannot use Back or Forward buttons to navigate between pages of a Flash movie.
- Text within the Flash movie is not selectable or searchable, and therefore will not show up in any searches or indexing done by search engines. Visitors cannot copy text found in a Flash movie.

**Splashes or Intros.** Many web visitors dislike when Flash intros, or splash screens, are forced on them. Before using a Flash intro, consider:

- A Skip button to allow visitors to choose whether they want to watch the intro.
- A link to "View Flash Intro," so you can track how many visitors choose to watch the intro.
- Redirecting return visitors to the main content page so they do not have to repeat the intro whenever they come to your site.

Another concern about Flash is that it requires a plug-in. While it is small and many web visitors have it installed on their browsers, the use of a plug-in can cause visitors to abandon your site.

**Navigation.** Good navigation is a core element of a good web site. Make sure yours helps rather than hinders web visitors. We strongly discourage using Flash in navigation, since such use often ends up with a navigation structure that is invisible until a visitor triggers an event (such as a mouse-over), or it is not searchable or editable.

**Accessibility.** Related to these limitations is accessibility. Web visitors with disabilities who rely on nongraphical browsers and screen readers won't be able to access the content of your site.

**Speed.** Flash-dependent sites sometimes require a fast internet connection. Visitors with slower internet connections, such as dial-up and some forms of DSL, may be frustrated with Flash-based sites. Consider displaying a 'Loading...' sequence with a progress indicator, and loading images and sound in the background where possible to improve the site's perceived speed.

**Future Editing.** Though it may not matter to web visitors, future editing of your Flash-dependent site could become a huge thorn in the side of your developer successors. This is especially true if you are building your navigation or other core features in Flash. If a term or name occurring in your Flash-based navigation needs to be changed or corrected, it takes much longer to locate a Flash file, open it, alter it, and replace it than it does to simply edit and HTML-based term. This is even truer if colors or styles need to be altered. Ask yourself if Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) couldn't accomplish your design goals more easily and compatibly.

#### QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN CHOOSING TO USE FLASH

- Is the use of Flash necessary or even appropriate for use on my site?
- Is there any critical information in my Flash files that will be unavailable to people who either don't have Flash or have it disabled?
- Can users without Flash still navigate my site?
- Is Flash used in a way on my site that it will be cumbersome or impossible for users to bookmark, search or copy important information?
- Is the Flash on my site distracting to the user?
- Does the Flash on my site become an obstacle between the user and my content?
- Will users on low-bandwidth connections have trouble using my site?
- Are there easily-accessed ways of skipping the Flash movies, muting sound, etc., on my site?

Asking these questions will help you ensure your use of Flash creates a positive, rather than a frustrating, experience for visitors to your web site.

#### A BETTER ALTERNATIVE: CASCADING STYLE SHEETS (CSS)

Much of the time, inexperienced web designers can forget the powerful combination of HTML and Cascading Style Sheets (CSS). Veteran designers know that HTML is the perfect language for creating the **structure** of your site, while CSS allows you to create the **presentation, style or look** of your site. This becomes incredibly important for the longevity of your site.

A single CSS file can control the presentation of an entire site, which means it is your answer to consistency and efficiency. If, for example, you decide to use green throughout your site instead of red, you can make the change one time in the CSS file and it will make the change throughout your site, whether you have five pages or 500 pages. Think of the time it will save you, as well as the confidence that the change is consistent throughout the site.