1&3. "The Diesel site uses Flash 8's video compression a lot," says Florian Schmitt. "Every single still life is animated very subtly, and we used the compression codec to give us a lot of quality on this. It's cheap in terms of file size."

2. The church window shot uses Flash 8's screen layer effect on the text. "Before, you could do it in Director but not Flash," explains Schmitt

1

2

3

SITE: DIESEL CAMOUFLAGE TALES
www.diesel.com/campaigns/ss06/
AGENCY: HI-RES!
www.hi-res.net

Hi-ReS' Flash 8 site for Diesel is a multi-layered narrative, whose layers peel away as the viewer mouses across the screen.

Hi-ReS director Florian Schmitt says: "I've always seen the strength of Flash as being adding an element of cinematic narrative to things. With Flash 6 and 7 Macromedia was trying to push the idea that you could do everything with Flash that previously you thought HTML was better at, but with 8 I think Adobe is happy to allow HTML to lead in one field and for Flash to take over the entertainment side of things."

With Diesel, Hi-ReS uses 8's ability to entertain to great effect: "One major benefit of Flash 8 is the ability to render stuff to the screen, which means if you have lots of stuff moving on-screen at the same time you can run it at ten or 20 times the speed. And with things like having a glow rollover, in the past you'd have to go into Photoshop, create that image, import it into Flash and then fade between the two."

Website design is dominated by one software application - Flash. Sean Ashcroft explains how its eighth and latest version is shaping our online experiences, for better or worse

Flash Grows Up

There are murmurs that Flash 8 might just be the iteration that will usher this landmark software application's passage into adulthood – and transport it, and us, to deep waters beyond our current online experience. There are others, however, who believe that 8 is luring designers into dangerous shallows.

Jon McVey – creative director of Seattle-based communications agency Zaaz (www.zaaz.com) – is a deep water man. "Since version 1.0, Flash has been battling the perception that it was the tool that created the animations on sites that just made you click Skip Intro," says the Cumbria-born designer. "I think it's only just coming out of that now. Finally it's robust enough to build entire sites."

A big part of Flash 8's robustness stems from features such as its high-quality font-rendering engine, FlashType, and its vastly improved video codec, On2 VP6. "Video compression means you can use longer sequences without worrying about file sizes," says Florian Schmitt, the 34-year-old director of London digital media company Hi-ReS! (www.hi-res.net). "It also means you can add quality." (For examples of how these and other features are liberating Flash designers see the case studies boxouts).

But it is Flash 8's filters and effects that hogged the headlines upon its release in September 2005, because these give designers access to results that, in prior versions, only hard-bitten hand coders could achieve.

"There are things we've been doing for years with Flash that pushed it to the edge, but with version 8 all that stuff is now a piece of cake," confirms Joshua Hirsch, "minister of technology" with Brooklyn-based interactive agency Big Spaceship (www.bigspaceship.com). "We're going to have to go with new ▶

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1-4. Zaaz's new site for Converse makes full use of Flash 8's improved font rendering capabilities. "You can use smaller type and it's legible, and that's a big deal with the web in general. It looks so much better," says creative director Jon McVey


1

SITE: CONVERSE
www.converse.com
AGENCY: ZAAZ
www.zaaz.com

Jon McVey is the Cumbrian-born creative director of Zaaz. Its site for footwear giant Converse is the studio's first major Flash 8 undertaking.

"The Converse site wasn't really about Flash 8, it was about creating something that is more like an application in the way you interact with it," McVey says. "Flash is the big enabler for that."

A key feature for Zaaz was Flash 8's high-quality font-rendering engine, FlashType. "One of the big things for us is the way it renders type so much better," explains McVey. "You can use smaller type and it's legible, and that's a big deal with the web in general. It looks so much better."

2

◀things to get to that edge."

McVey welcomes this simplicity. "We've just launched a Flash 8 site for Converse footwear (www.converse.com) and have made use of Flash 8's dynamic blurring feature, so when you're in one part of the site and launch something else you don't lose the context of where you are because the background blurs out dynamically. In the past, you'd use two versions of the background image – one blurred – and transition between them. That doubled file sizes and took more time."

Tellingly, though, McVey adds: "The Converse site isn't about Flash, but about creating something more like an application in the way you interact with it. We've not used all Flash 8's bells and whistles for the sake of it."

And there's the rub – for many leading interactive designers say Flash 8's ease of use is promoting ill-considered design.

"I've yet to see a Flash 8 site that's elegant and efficient, and I'm wondering if one really exists," says New York-based Joshua Davis (www.joshuadavis.com), one of the world's most influential digital artists and web designers. "Trying to do animation, graphics, video, interaction and use all these filters means it's no longer about the project or client, but about how much shit you can stuff into one fucking website to show people you used Flash 8. You can't just click a filter and call yourself a designer," Davis says. "You should be able to build things in Flash that are elegant, that have a concept and whose interaction is appropriate. People should be able to look at that and not know what version of Flash was used. Just look at the work of Yugo Nakamura [www.yugop.com]. You have no idea if his work is authored in Flash 5, 6, 7 or 8. It's about building appropriate interaction." ▶

3

4

You can't just click a filter and call yourself a designer. You should be able to build things in Flash that are elegant, that have a concept and whose interaction is appropriate

Joshua Davis

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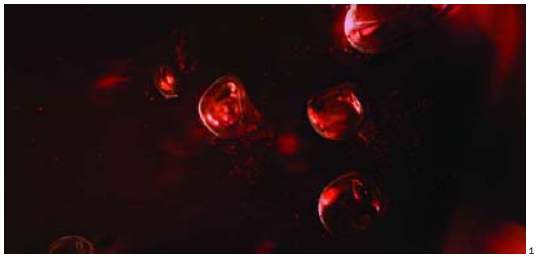
1. Still from a high-definition animation featuring in the Underworld: Evolution website's opening sequence. Flash 8's advanced video codec means file sizes aren't excessively bloated.
2. Flash 8 allowed Big Spaceship to achieve subtle results easily. In this shot, Kate Beckinsale's hair sways slightly in the wind. "A new stroke effect allowed me to put a gradient actually on a stroke, so I was able to soften the edges of this vector," says art director Garrett Nantz



1

2

SITE: UNDERWORLD: EVOLUTION
www.sonypictures.com/movies/underworldevolution
AGENCY: BIG SPACESHIP
www.bigspaceship.com

Each year Brooklyn-based interactive design company Big Spaceship produces between 20 and 30 sites for the blockbuster releases of movie giants such as Miramax, Sony and Paramount. Its teaser site for the vampire romp Underworld: Evolution, starring Kate Beckinsale, was among the first large-scale Flash 8 releases. The site is built using character-based video and production stills, all ensconced in gothic ornamentation.

"The mood of the movie and type of effects we can do on the site really lends itself to a lot of the things that Flash 8 provides," explains Big Spaceship "minister of technology" Joshua Hirsch. "The text rendering is so much better than Flash 7. We're able to render the text right in Flash. It looks amazing."

He adds: "By using Flash 8's built-in capabilities such as bitmap effects and filters like blur we can make wider use of a single image. Before, for example, we'd have to make five different versions of different blur states." Savings can also be made on file size and on time, as it's no longer necessary to import lots of different images.

◀ Schmitt gives a real-world insight into what Davis is talking about: "The Diesel site (see boxout) was one of the first sites we used Flash 8 on, and when we started we had all the buttons turned on, but as time went on these were gradually turned off, because they come at a price. The site was becoming so slow. Unless you use the effects very wisely they will kill performance."

Davis continues: "People should focus on content and not really care about the technology that drives it. Flash has this weird thing in that people are always associated with its use. People come up to me and say 'You're that Flash guy'. It's ridiculous."

The essence of Flash for Davis is that, like Java, "you write once and run anywhere". He adds: "In the past I'd spend half of my time writing code for the client and the other half writing code for the end-user. Flash eliminated all that. As long as people had the plug-in then what platform or browser they were on didn't matter. That left me free to concentrate on creativity, and for me this is still the sole reason for using Flash."

Hirsch's take on Flash is that "with great power comes great responsibility", a view likely to be endorsed by Flash co-creator Robert Tatsumi, who told Creative Review he is proud of Flash because "artists care about their work, and we were able to help them deliver work they could be proud of".

Tatsumi – now an Adobe engineering manager – added: "Flash changed life for designers by giving them another outlet for their creative energies. This has been the most fulfilling part of Flash for me personally. I love to see all the beautiful creative things that designers and artists have created using Flash."

Davis' feature-lust offenders aside, Tatsumi can look forward to more fulfilling times ahead.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF FLASH

The genesis of Flash could not be more analogue: Lego. Flash creator Jonathan Gay was a Lego lunatic, and admits that the design process he developed with plastic bricks on his living room carpet is "more or less the same process we ultimately used to develop Flash". "It taught me the basics of engineering design and iterative refinement," Gay has explained.

Lego eventually gave way to computer games. Working for Silicon Beach Software, Gay's 1986 Mac role-playing adventure, Dark Castle, funded a computer science degree at California's Harvey Mudd College. Lego may have provided the building blocks for Flash, but Dark Castle was its inspiration. "I learnt about animation, digitised sound and how to synchronise the two," he explains on Adobe's site.

After college, Gay turned his attention to building graphics editors, first creating the PostScript-driven package SuperPaint II and then, for Aldus, an app called Intellidraw. Its modest success gave rise to his own company, FutureWave Software, whose first venture was SmartSketch software for a pen-based computer called the EO. "It was designed to make drawing on a computer easier than drawing on paper," says Gay.

Flash co-creator Robert Tatsumi co-coded SmartSketch with Gay, and he revealed to Creative Review the moment that triggered the beginning of its evolution into Flash: "That EO market didn't pan out, and we soon transferred SmartSketch to run on Windows. SmartSketch was doing OK, but not great. In 1995 Jon and I were presenting at the SIGGRAPH show in LA, and were next to a booth for Animo, which was a high-end animation package. We had many animators coming by our booth, and they were intrigued by SmartSketch's drawing tools, which were designed to be a more natural way to draw for artists.

"They asked us if we had any animation support, which we didn't," he continues. "At the same time, Netscape released the plug-in architecture for its browser. Jon had the insight that with an animation tool and a web player we could build an authoring and delivery system for animators. Animators really had no way to deliver their creations other than TV, CD-Roms and floppies. We saw that the web could give animators a whole new outlet for their creations."

The pair rewrote SmartSketch to focus more on its animation capabilities, and it shipped in 1996 as FutureSplash Animator.

UCLA graduate Tatsumi adds: "We first had an inkling we were on to something big when both DisneyBlast and MSN decided to use our technology. At the time we had a lot of competition from DHTML, Java and other plug-in-based companies but I believe we won for a few reasons. We were able to deliver content with a very small file size for the content and the player, and we also had a reasonably sophisticated authoring tool compared to a lot of our competition. The third factor was the quality of our rendering. Our anti-aliased graphics enabled artists to create beautiful animations with a very low bandwidth cost."

Macromedia recognised as much, and moved swiftly, acquiring FutureSplash shortly after it shipped – and relaunching it as Flash 1.0.

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