The Legacy of Flash - How will it Affect You?

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When Apple first launched the iPad, they stood up and made a bold statement: no Flash support! Quite a few web sites use Flash including YouTube. But Apple was determined to embrace HTML 5 and didn't want the huge overhead or bugginess of Flash bogging down or crashing those small tablets. Better performance, more stability and longer battery life was much more important.

Next the Droid pad came out and it too did not support Flash out of the box. The same effects would be available through android development / java application development and web development using HTML 5.

Flash was starting to look like it was just not up to the performance demands to reside on these new devices. More than a phone but not quite a computer, people are turning to the pads as an alternative to lugging around a bulky laptop.

But at the same time there are millions of web sites that rely heavily on Flash. Streaming media / video sites like Hulu won't work without Flash. Many online video games or their web sites also require Flash. If you want to watch movie or video game trailers, more Flash. The list goes on.

Things seemed to be in limbo though as Adobe (the maker of Flash) kept pushing forward. Apps began to appear that allowed users to use Flash web sites on the iPad and Droid pad. It wasn't available out of the box but perhaps Flash would find its way onto the pads eventually. After all, there are a lot of Flash developers out there creating a lot of Flash applications and Flash based content. That doesn't just go away.

... Or does it?

Then in November of 2011 Adobe made the fatal announcement: it was pulling back on its effort with Flash and turning to HTML 5.

So what does this mean to us? If we have Flash do we panic? Is it time to switch everything over and get as far away from Flash as possible?

First of all, Adobe is not completely abandoning Flash. They are ratcheting back on flash used in web application development and taking a new direction. This means Flash will not just suddenly disappear. Instead, it will settle into its niche and become one of the less prevalent modes of delivering multimedia.

Video is the first medium that is being converted from Flash to HTML 5. YouTube and Vimeo are proof of this. HTML 5 has a fairly easy way to embed simple video and making something that is more advanced isn't any more difficult (still not exactly easy) than it was with Flash.

Online games are something different. While some developers love to show off their web application development skills in how they can convert games to HTML 5, it really isn't very practical... yet. There just aren't any good tools or libraries out there to make writing games in HTML 5 very easy... yet. Anyway, most games on the tablets are made specifically for the tablets and you can download them through the Droid Market or iPad App Store.

But if your web site uses Flash, you might want to think a little about when you will make the change.

First, if you need these new and growing groups of pad users to be able to use your web site, make sure nothing critical on your site uses Flash. Things that are necessary for the site to function properly should be converted right away or you alienate this segment of the market.

You need not convert everything. Once you have the critical components converted, go through the remaining Flash elements. Classify each for 1) the likelihood of it being used on a pad or phone and 2) level of how critical it is for people to be able to use it. Use this to prioritize the conversion.

Another thing to consider is that HTML 5 is not yet fully supported on all computers. Anyone using Internet Explorer 8 or below (and this is still a rather large group) does not have access to many of the new HTML 5 features. Converting too quickly could mean you alienate one group (likely your existing customers) in order to capture a new group. If this is the case, you may need to run both HTML 5 and Flash at the same time and have special code to detect which is the best to use.

In short, as always, you need to keep an eye on who your target user is and what their device is capable of. If you are losing a big portion of good customers, converting now may well be worth it. But if you are not losing anything by staying with Flash, stay the course and let HTML 5 mature and gain wider support before taking the plunge.

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