



Raoul Millais & Matthew Don on...

# Have your Flash and find it

Raoul Millais and Matthew Don of Skive look at ways to improve the searchability of Flash files

While recent changes in search technology – such as the announcement of Adobe’s Ichabod – have potentially improved the searchability of Flash files, further consideration of the broader challenges of Flash and SEO is paramount to a successful search engine presence in the future.

The indexing of SWFs is not enough. Search engines discerning valuable optimised text from other textual content, such as button labels, is problematic. See for yourself – search filetype:swf in Google and look at the snippets. In addition, content pulled into the SWF from external sources isn’t yet available, and the results within the search engine results pages show only embedded text.

To combat this restriction, implementing an SEO strategy and creating an optimised presentation of your content is vital. The method of providing an indexable textual rendering of your application and linking a search result to a state within Flash provides a seamless user experience and is the most reliable way of guaranteeing search engine visibility of your rich media for key search terms.

In developing your SEO strategy, traditional techniques should be employed when planning your text to ensure high positioning for key search terms in the search results. For more information, consider reading a more in-depth guide, such as Mike Moran and Bill Hunt’s comprehensive *Search Engine Marketing, Inc* (IBM Press). Or subscribe to one of the many SEO blogs.

At a minimum, you should include a unique description and page title metadata for each piece of content and you must decompose your

application architecture into a hierarchy, corresponding to the content you want indexed. Generally, you want each piece of content to have its own URL so that it can appear as a separate indexable result. You can also use some of your most important search keywords in the URLs.

Collate all the textual content you’ve prepared into a central data source on the server. One way to achieve this is to put the content in a flat XML file. For more complex sites, you’ll want to look at more scalable solutions, such as a CMS. With the availability of a data source for your content, you can present an SEO-optimised rendering and provide Flash with the equivalent presentation text.

The approach you take to rendering content from the external data source depends on your choice of server-side technologies. Some common strategies include applying a templating engine, transforming the XML data into XHTML using XSLT, or binding your data source to server-side controls.

The XHTML rendered from your data source is what the search engines will index and you should ensure a consistent user experience from the indexed search results to the Flash. A good technique for this is SWFAddress: a library that enables deep linking to particular content or an application state within your Flash landing pages.

Finally, you must, of course, embed your Flash in your rendered XHTML SEO content. SWFObject uses standards-compliant methods to embed your Flash in the page, which makes it easier to cleanly render your search engine-friendly presentation. With SWFObject, based on the current URL you can pass the appropriate SWFAddress URL fragment to

the Flash movie as a FlashVar, so the Flash application can navigate to the correct position and load the data from the external data source.

What if you don’t have Flash installed? Currently, you see the rather plain textual content. The steps taken in this guide, however, set us up nicely for progressive enhancement of the content. With judicious use of JavaScript and CSS, you can style and enliven the static alternative HTML content.

Future developments between the search engines and Adobe may reduce the need for a textual rendering for Flash SEO purposes – namely, native support for deep linking, indexing of dynamically rendered data and W3C-compliant Flash Metadata (XMP). However, creating a progressively enhanced solution will always be the best practice for providing the widest reach for end users and your search results. ●

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