Macromedia Flash Professional 8: Training from the Source
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In order to say anything at all, I will say at least one nice thing about this book, but it won't be in the first paragraph. The book may not need to go all the way back to the drawing board, but it shouldn't be considered a release candidate, either. Between the editors (all four of them) and the two authors, someone should have read it carefully before me. It is so full of mistakes (typos, inconsistencies, bugs, misstatements, misconceptions) that I explicitly recommend not reading it if that's an option. Even the much abbreviated list of errata available from the book's web site needs its own errata list! These mistakes make it impossible to complete a chapter without distraction or frustration.

Flash is "a rich media content [authoring tool and] delivery platform," and you've probably seen Flash animations and games on web pages already. This description may come from "the source," but neither author works for Macromedia, and the publisher is actually Peachpit. Reportedly, a Macromedia product support team reviews titles in this series, but they may have overlooked this one. The authors distinguish between two aspects of Flash applications, expressiveness and development, and concentrate heavily on the former. A chapter on ActionScript (development) is included and code for lessons can approach two pages in length, but the book might better be entitled "Expressing Yourself with Macromedia Flash Professional 8." Both the code and a 30-day trial version of Flash are included on the accompanying CD. The trial version can also be downloaded directly from Macromedia via Adobe's web site.

The book is organized around thirteen lessons on topics including the Flash user interface, graphics, text, audio, animation, video, dynamic data, mobile devices, and deployment. I was disappointed that slide presentations aren't included. Lessons are estimated to take between one and two hours each to complete. Chapters begin with a list of objectives (this is what you will learn) and end in a summary (this is what you have learned, hopefully). Between the two are nearly step-by-step instructions describing what to click on or type to complete the lesson, accompanied by scores of screen shots showing where and how. Some are taken from a PC and some from a Macintosh, and keystroke combinations are described for each platform. I did appreciate the use of XML for dynamic data, the emphasis throughout the book on bandwidth issues, and the tip about version control. An appendix includes a useful list of online resources. Now I've said something nice.

If I selected just a few typos, they would sound trivial, so this accounting is more painstaking and perhaps painful. I stopped recording problems at two pages, but slowed down before that in order to absorb some content. This doesn't include any of the twenty fairly serious mistakes the publisher lists. Many problems would have been caught by a simple spell or grammar check. Commas appear adjacently, quotation marks are misplaced, spaces disappear between words, sentences begin with a comma, words go missing, and text doesn't survive a simple copy and paste. The

authors or editors can't decide on a standard. Is it Cmd > Return, Cmd+Return, or Cmd-Return?

Readers can easily surmount these problems, but content is also affected periodically. Directions state that an ActionScript version 1 to 3 should be chosen, but only 1 and 2 exist. Directory names are incorrectly recorded, making them difficult to find. The format for a time specification is given as seconds:milliseconds when the separator should be a decimal point. Here is a particularly bad example with corrections in square brackets:

> If you have a large block of text in the TextArea component, you can break it into paragraph[s] by using /n [\n] in the string or putting the paragraphs between <p> and </P> [for consistency, </p>] tags [in htmlText]. If you do use quotation marks around words, place them in "\" [\"] sequences such as <\>"Jord"<\> [\"Jord\"].

In other instances, I can't tell whether the authors are just poor typists or are more seriously misinformed. To move down ten pixels, the text instructs the reader to use y-10 rather than the correct y+10. The purportedly absolute path to a file begins with dots, and three of them at that. Sampling frequency is described in waves (rather than samples) per second. LPC is translated as Laser rather than Linear Predictive Coding. Booleans true and false are explained as absolute values, although that term has a more common meaning. The numerator and denominator trade places in the example of modulo arithmetic. Code snippets which could easily have been valid are incomplete. The equality operator == is mistakenly identified as being for strict [identity?] equality. A bitmap graphic supposedly requires that the location of every pixel be stored explicitly, although starting point and overall height and width suffice. Before long I began to doubt nearly everything on the page.

Since the text showed so many problems, I rooted for the graphics. They fare better, but although the many screen shots are helpful, some should be removed, others edited, and more added. For some reason, program code is often written out once in text and then repeated adjacently as a graphic as if the page count hadn't been met. The authors overlook opportunities to label screen shots in obvious and helpful ways, like to identify icons and different kinds of handles. The labels and explanation don't always use matching terminology. Missing are pictures of the cursors used by the program and graphics to illustrate technical concepts like variable scope and event handling, which were explained poorly in text. Graphics are powerful, so why not use them?

Macromedia's stamp of approval on this book led me to high, but arguably reasonable expectations, which were not met. The problems are serious enough to have distracted me from the content, and hundreds of other books on Flash can likely do as well or better. Online listings for several include browsable content powered, ironically enough, by Flash. I recommend training from some other source.

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