



Motion and Digital Media:

The Experience Matters

By *Michael Gough*

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How motion in digital content has evolved to match audience expectations and technology changes.

Motion: You see its influence everywhere. On billboards, bus terminals, computer screens. Motion is a principal part of the contemporary visual vocabulary. And there are good reasons for that. We have a basic human attraction to it. We naturally pay attention to what moves. And, significantly, its presentation and use is enabled by digital technologies.

If you think about it, most of the design work that we currently admire has movement as a design element, whether composed of multiple frames, motion blur, or simple captured action. You know it when you see it: Motion piques your senses. It engages and inspires. It's often surrounded by a kind of innovation and energy that is hard to quantify. And, more than any other design element, it captures the tenor of the times we live in.

Design is the concrete expression of a vision or idea that elicits a response. For some, it drives a purchase. For many, it stirs or creates a memory. And for still others, it's all about the process of creating in the first place.

Over the past decade, the advent of digital technologies has elevated and extended the practice of design by adding the control and presentation of motion to the designer's set of tools. How we use motion and rich content to develop compelling, dynamic web sites, interactive self-service portals, and even share photographs, is raising our expectations for quality digital experiences and extending what is possible.

In the Beginning

But developing engaging digital content hasn't proved easy. When the web was first gaining acceptance, anyone and everyone was putting something online just to be online. There were no rules guiding development, and no laws governing quality or purpose. Whether the material was good or bad didn't matter. The goal was to be a part of this new medium.

Still for many, it was a difficult and frustrating experience. This new medium suggested motion (recall animated GIFs), but couldn't deliver. The reuse of print design techniques in this new digital medium rang hollow. HTML was static.

Then we began to see movement online. Technology like Macromedia Flash, and tools like Adobe Photoshop and After Effects, allowed this desire for motion to surface. Adobe and Macromedia made it possible for many to create engaging digital content, and to also develop this content according to a common set of rules. No longer were people abusing Flash to create "skip intros" screens, they were using Flash to create meaningful experiences that often involved motion.

This kind of foundation helped designers and developers and even hobbyists to begin focusing more on the idea they wanted to communicate and less on the mechanics of the technology needed to make it happen. Flash became ubiquitous. And as end users, we began experiencing content that was natively, actively, and compellingly digital.

The digital world came to life—it moved. And expectations grew for what this new medium could deliver.

The Content is Moving

Recently, technology like Flash Video has helped raise the bar even further. Video is no longer a second-class digital citizen, stuck in the mechanics of a separate player. You can fuse video together with data, graphics, and sound. You can create dynamic interactive controls that are unique and appropriate to a given presentation. You can begin to offer truly rich motion-based content that can be viewed by nearly everyone who has a device connected to the Internet.

Meanwhile, devices themselves are undergoing dramatic change. The pervasiveness of wireless technology is making us all mobile. The content is moving, and so are we. Many use smart phones or mobile devices just as they would a more traditional desktop computer, and they expect their experiences to be the same or better. People are beginning to use their handhelds to read books, get sports scores, and trade stocks. And the ergonomics of handhelds mean that the experience is more intimate, more personal. As users, our needs—and expectations – are immediate and we are less concerned about the “how” and more interested in the content we are experiencing. This is a good thing.

Today’s level of interactivity is incredible. This remarkable combination of motion and the pervasiveness of digital media is opening up new possibilities for both practical and expressive uses.

What’s Next

If we look at what we are able to do today – to easily use digital technologies to express ourselves, to put our ideas in motion—imagine what we’ll be doing a few short years from now. The motion-based, interconnected digital experience will touch everything we do. From entertainment, to information, from the ways we learn and transact, to the ways we connect and communicate—our digital experiences will be as integrated and even more effective than anything we’ve known to date.

This is important from a commerce perspective, as well. It is already clear that the more expressive the experience, the more consumers will be willing to pay for the experience, which means we have more opportunity to create and express our visions online. We already buy pay-per-view movies on our televisions—why not pay for content that can be viewed on our laptops or handhelds?

The point is—we have raised our own expectations of what we want technology to do for us, and in a remarkably short time, technology has developed accordingly. Our job now becomes one of extending the passion, creativity, and technology in more and more directions with an increasing emphasis on motion and on applications that are truly useful. We must continue to use technology to translate our visions into final products. And, increasingly, these final products will be more than the direct translation of products or services or means of expression that were available in other mediums. As we continue to raise the bar, they will be true expressions of what digital technology, the technology of motion, can deliver.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Gough was Macromedia’s chief creative officer and, with Mike Sundermeyer, manages user experience and user design at Adobe. An advocate for quality in digital experiences, Gough has been pushing the digital envelope for years. Previously, he was the vice president of Brand Design at Nike, the chief creative officer of Quokka Sports and the creative director of Construct.

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