

MEET  
ANIMATION'S  
LATEST STAR:  
**FLASH.**  
IT'S FAST.  
IT'S CHEAP.  
AND ALMOST  
ANYONE CAN  
USE IT. NOW  
PLAYING ON  
TELEVISION  
AND  
COMPUTER  
SCREENS  
NEAR YOU.

BY MICHELLE TAUTE

# FLASH FLOOD

Sandro Corsaro was part of the first wave of animators to use Flash for broadcast TV. After studying traditional animation at the University of Southern California, he got a job with a dot-com in the late '90s, and his employer taught him Flash. "I always knew I was going to use this at some point to get my work on television," he says. "It's like having a horse and all of a sudden someone hands you a car." He thought Flash was going to change the world—at least the world for animators—and his instincts were dead on.



Flash has been the web designer's best friend for years, but it's just now coming into its own in the world of animation. If you're a cartoon fan, you've seen the fruits of its labor on the Warner Bros. "¡Mucha Lucha!" and the Cartoon Network's "Hi Hi Puffy AmiYumi." It's also been used for movies, commercials and homegrown efforts all over the web. Corsaro estimates that only a handful of animators were using Flash for broadcast TV five or six years ago, but he says that number is probably 40 or 50 today. He's done Flash animation for MTV, Nick at Nite and Warner Bros., and now he's the creative director for a DVD company where he uses the software to create things like menus and bonus games.

## POWER TO THE PEOPLE

Flash boasts a long list of advantages over traditional animation. "It's cheap and fast," says Bernard Derriman, a veteran Disney animator who created his own original series, "Arj and Poopy," ([www.arjandpoopy.com](http://www.arjandpoopy.com)) in Flash. "You can do everything yourself. Once you own the program, it's basically free." He can do a three-minute animation in Flash in just a few weeks, but the same effort using traditional techniques might take several months and thousands of dollars. The software makes the animation process less labor-intensive. After he's created a scene where a character is talking, for example, Flash allows him to re-use that same mouth movement over and over again.

Flash has also removed the barriers of entry into the animation field. With the software and a decent computer, almost anyone can create animation. But that's both good and bad news. "The big thing with Flash is that so many people are doing it and not many of them are trained as animators," Derriman says. "It can get a bad name for itself because it's done badly everywhere." Small file sizes make it easy to post animations online and spread the word through e-mail. Corsaro says a lot of Flash has a vector look, but there are also pieces of animation people would never guess were made with the program. He looks at the software as a tool and believes that the quality of the end product is up to the person using it. When he finds a new animation, he looks at the quality of the storytelling as much as the animation. "I'm hoping we get to the point where it's not just *Flash* animation, it's animation, period," he says.

It's a change that will happen slowly as more people become aware of the software's capabilities. The prestigious Annecy International Animated Film Festival, for example, has a category for Internet series. Last year, Derriman won that category with an episode of his "Arj and Poopy" cartoon. The series features a man and his cat, and it's based on the humor of professional comedian Arj Barker. His winning episode pokes fun at long-distance relationships. Derriman is also working on Australian television commercials for flavored straws. He's testing his concepts in Flash, though it still hasn't been decided what format the final commercials will take.

## PASSION PLUS PROFITS

Think about your favorite scene from your favorite movie. Now imagine it acted out entirely by cartoon bunnies. This offbeat concept has allowed Jennifer Shiman to turn a fun side project into a viable income stream. In early 2004, she used her spare time to create a 30-second cartoon parody of "The Exorcist" with Flash. She posted it to her website, and it became the first film in the now-famous 30-Second Bunnies Theatre Library ([www.angryalien.com](http://www.angryalien.com)). Shiman takes classic movies—ranging from "Jaws" to "Star Wars"—and creates a short highlight reel with her own troupe of cartoon bunny actors.

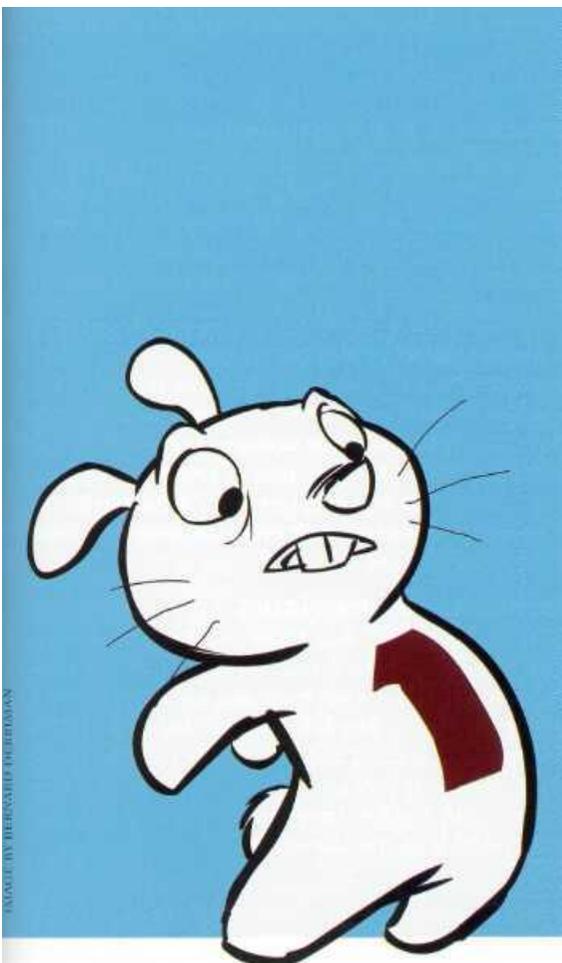
The results are funny enough to make you spit out your morning coffee, and they're also the perfect vehicle for taking advantage of viral marketing online. Bunny love spread quickly through blogs, e-mail forwards and newsletters, and today it's a full-fledged business. "I can pay my bills and buy food while working exclusively on bunny materials, which makes me very happy," Shiman says.

Her biggest client is Starz cable network, which commissioned three bunny pieces in late 2004 and 10 in 2005. This year, the company has already ordered a number of parodies, including "Brokeback Mountain," "Caddyshack" and "Rocky." (We can't wait to see the bunnies battle it out in the boxing ring.) Shiman also licensed "Titanic" bunnies to Fox as an Easter egg for the film's special-edition DVD.

In many ways, her experience is a Flash-animator's fairy tale. It's also a testament to the software's power and versatility. After animating her first short film in the mid-'90s, Shiman made her living through digital design, print design and electronic production. She started to teach herself Flash in 1998 as a cheaper and more accessible way to make animated shorts.

"My ultimate goal was to support myself by creating animated content of my own design," Shiman says. With Flash, she can make cartoons and adapt the files for viewing on TVs, movie screens and computers. She can also use the software to convert her work into online, interactive games.

Nick Worthey hopes to blaze a similar trail. For the past five years, he's made a living as a freelance graphic designer. "I've been interested in animation since I



## Catch the WAVE

Repeat after me: This is research, not procrastination. Now sit back and relive that Saturday-morning cartoon high with these Flash gems.

**THE 30-SECOND BUNNIES THEATRE LIBRARY** [www.angryalien.com](http://www.angryalien.com) •

You can't watch just one. Check out these so-second renditions of classic films acted out entirely by cartoon bunnies.

**ARJ AND POOPY** [www.arjandpoopy.com](http://www.arjandpoopy.com)

A humorous series about a guy and his pet cat. It's based on the work of comedian Arj Barker and is animated by Disney vet Bernard Derriman.

**ATOMFILMS** [www.atomfilms.com](http://www.atomfilms.com)

This popular short-film site has a category just for Flash films under the animation link. Check out flicks from a variety of animators.

**VIDLIT** [www.vidlit.com](http://www.vidlit.com)

Video may have killed the radio star, but Flash animation is breathing new life into publishing with these catchy book trailers.

**THE WAND** [www.nickworthey.com](http://www.nickworthey.com)

What would you do with a magic wand? Don't miss this \$25,000 grand-prize winner from the Intel Indies Film Contest.

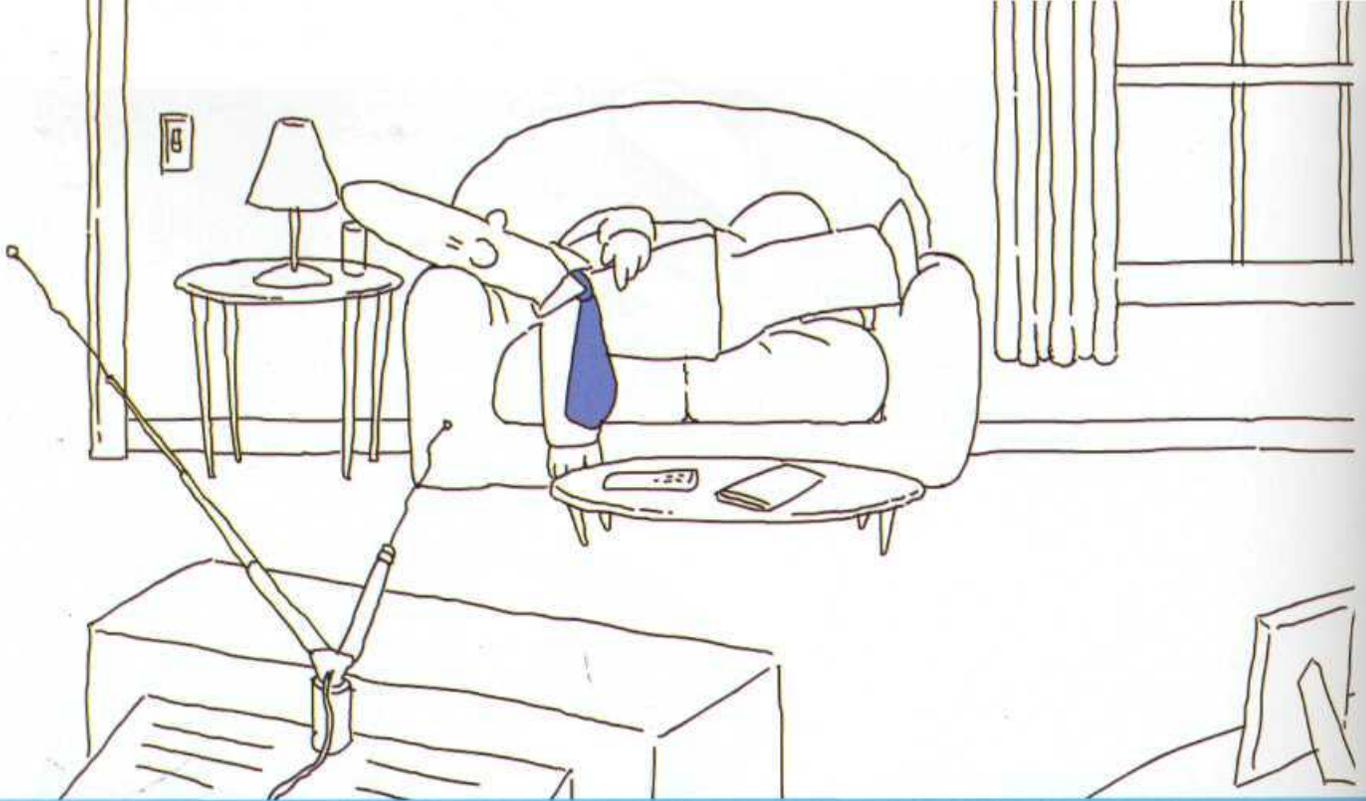


IMAGE BY NICK WOOLLEY

## DIVING INTO FLASH ANIMATION

In many respects, finding and collaborating with a Flash animator is similar to the process you'd go through with a photographer or illustrator. But there are some specifics to keep in mind:

### 1. KNOW YOUR LIMITS.

Sandro Corsaro, co-author of "Hollywood 2D Digital Animation: The New Flash Production Revolution," often hears people say, "I know Flash." But being strong in motion graphics doesn't necessarily make you an animator. He believes designers should "pick a major" when it comes to Flash. He's never met anyone who's a perfect 10 in animation, ActionScript and design. If you're new to animation, consider hiring a freelancer.

### 2. ASK FOR A SOURCE FILE.

Look at reels. Check references. But if an animator needs to work closely with your team, Corsaro says, it's a good idea to ask for a 10- or 30-second test along with the corresponding source file. Look for clear naming conventions and organized layer systems—things that will make file-sharing go more smoothly.

### 3. PICK THE RIGHT PROJECTS.

Flash animation works better for some things than others. If your client has a 3D character, for example, it would have to be converted to a 2D version for Flash. In addition, Corsaro recommends staying away from things that are super photo-realistic, which tend not to come off as well in a limited-animation style.

### 4. USE FLASH FOR GOOD, NOT EVIL.

Animator Jennifer Shiman urges designers not to use Flash at the expense of good design; she's seen too many examples of obnoxious banners and gratuitous splash pages. "Flash is a great tool when it's kept simple," says animator Bernard Derriman. He advises against importing too many photos.

### 5. KNOW WHAT IT NEEDS TO DO.

Not all Flash animators have the same skill set, so it helps to think through what you need up front. One thing to consider, says Jen deHaan, a senior technical writer for Adobe Systems Inc., is whether you want interactivity. Not all animators know ActionScript, so thinking ahead means you'll avoid the need for a third party down the road.

### 6. THINK ABOUT IMPORTING.

"Graphic designers need to be aware of how their work will import into Flash," deHaan says. Talk with the animator about what tools you use and how best to save your work. Also talk with her about the filters or effects you're using and whether they can be reproduced in Flash. If they can't be, the animator may have to work with a raster image instead of a vector one, which might limit the animation.

was a little kid," he says. "But I never had the tools to do it." Now Flash has given him an outlet for those creative impulses. He was introduced to the program in a class, and has spent the past year or so honing his skills. Worthey's big break came when he won the Grand Prize in the Intel Indies Film Contest late last year with "The Wand" ([www.nickworthey.com](http://www.nickworthey.com)). The four-minute animation netted him a \$25,000 cash prize and \$20,000 in home-theater equipment. It's also given him exposure—the film has been viewed at least 50,000 times.

With the financial cushion provided by his winnings, Worthey plans to focus more of his time on animation. His award-winning movie shows a real knack for storytelling, as the main character finds and uses a magic wand—a required element under contest rules. "What interested me most was how having such power would affect the character's life," Worthey says. "The story grew naturally out of that." Rather than think up creative wishes, the protagonist magically acquires such cliché items as a mansion, trophy girlfriend and red sports car. The film's appeal comes from the emotional impact of these choices.

Now Worthey just needs to figure out what his next animation will be and how it will make money. Atom Films, one of the Intel contest sponsors, has expressed interest in helping produce his next effort. He can also place animations on the company's website, where filmmakers make money based on how many people watch their creations, which are paired with ads. "I'll have to find out how much I can make," he says. He's also working with a mobile phone company that wants to offer some of his work on a pay-per-view basis, but so far it hasn't been a profitable venture. Too bad he can't speed things up a hit with his own magic wand.

## POTENT PROMOTIONS

Flash is also a bankable star in the world of viral marketing, where web users send links with fun content to their friends. Liz Dubelman, for example, founded a company largely based on the software's power to create buzz online. She's one of two partners behind VidLit—a venture that produces Flash animations of the same name. A VidLit ([www.vidlit.com](http://www.vidlit.com)) is essentially the publishing world's version of a movie trailer. These short animations promote books with a compelling mix of photos, illustrations and text, typically narrated by the author. "It's about storytelling and the written word," Dubelman says. "We don't show an actual character because that takes away from reading." She often describes VidLits as "well-educated, high-tech slide shows," but they're definitely more effective than your average PowerPoint presentation.

One of the most successful VidLits was for a humorous book called "Yiddish with Dick and Jane." Almost a million people viewed the animation in its first month online and gave the title a sizable sales boost. Every offering, however, doesn't find its audience so quickly. "People often have a misconception about viral marketing," she says. "You really have to work the viral aspect." For new VidLits, a link is e-

mailed to a list that's 10,000 strong and includes connectors, or people with their own lists. Publishers also promote the URL and have even gotten the animations on popular book-selling sites like Amazon. Dubelman says the Internet is a great place to tap into niche audiences, and since almost everyone has a computer, she believes that Flash can reach all ages.

So far, her business model has been catching on. The first VidLit, an eight-minute depiction of one of Dubelman's short stories, launched in late 2004. "I had this idea that with the Internet there was almost no barrier to entry," she says. "I didn't have to use anyone else to distribute what I wanted to do." The company completed 25 paying projects its first year, and clients range from Time Warner to Random House to Rodale. According to Dubelman, the venture is profitable because overhead is low. The company is essentially a two-person operation that taps freelance talent for animation and illustration work.

It's an opportunity that's helped Emily Alexander launch her career as a freelance animator. A 2004 graduate of The Art Institute of Seattle, Alexander enjoys creating characters and began refining her creations during a Flash class. "I said to the teacher, 'Do you think there's a career in this?'" and he said "No," she recalls. "But I saw the potential." She returned to California after school and started looking for work, using her own website ([www.superbeans.com/emilycartoons](http://www.superbeans.com/emilycartoons)) and others like Craigslist, to find gigs. Today, VidLit is one of her main clients, but she's also done other projects, including animations to promote a Tony Hawk show on Sirius Radio.

This year, VidLit has started offering more original content, including a series called "The Exit," which features essays about the moment when you know a relationship is over. Dubelman plans to experiment with subscription, pay-per-view and advertising models to make these new animations profitable. She's also looking for ways to distribute VidLits on mobile devices, including the iPod. Publishers can already get the animations on DVD for use on TV or during promotional events.

Dubelman has even been asked to do VidLits for products, but those projects don't fit into the company's focus on storytelling. The requests, however, are a testament to just how many untapped possibilities there are for Flash animation. Maybe you'll find a way to harness its power for your next client project—or just to express your own creativity.

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