

Graphics for the Web: Plug-Ins

By Richard Lowe

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Article Title: Graphics for the Web: Plug-Ins
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You've probably noticed that just about any application of any real significance these days has the capability to be expanded in some way. Usually these are called "plug-ins", although they are also called snap-ins (Windows 2000), add-ons, add-ins (Outlook 2000), ActiveX Controls (Internet Explorer) and filters (Adobe Photoshop, as well as any number of other descriptive names.

The concept is simple, and the benefits are tremendous. Create an "engine" with basic functionality and allow for expansion by third-parties in a standard and organized way. Thus, for example, even though Adobe Photoshop performs an incredibly number of functions all on it's own, the authors felt it was necessary to allow others to contribute their skills. They did this by providing plug-ins and filters.

This also, not entirely coincidentally, got around the concept of "open source" which has been debated all over the internet for years. Pure open source is code which can be downloaded and modified by anyone - Unix is a good example of this. At the other extreme is virtually all of Microsoft's products - the sources are not made available to anyone except under specific and [legally] controlled circumstances. Plug-ins get around this argument by allowing the product to be expanded and it's behavior changed without releasing the source code to the general public.

The concept of plug-ins actually came into reality back in 1995. The Netscape browser developers had a problem - there were few, if any, accepted graphics and multimedia (videos, sound and such) standards available on the web, yet the browser had to be capable of displaying graphics and multimedia. The developers did not want to restrict their browser to just a few standards (which may or may not have become accepted) and they certainly did not want to release a new browser every

time a new multimedia format was created.

Thus plug-ins were born. This solved the problem very well. There was now no need to restrict formats or modify and distribute a new browser. All that needed to be done was create a plug in which handled the format. And best of all (for Netscape) this plug-in was generally created by some other company.

There were problems with the plug-in concept, however.

- Back in the days of slow modems, it could take a very long time to download a plug-in
- Plug-ins could crash the operating system or cause it to become unstable.
- If a visitor chose not to install a plug-in, then the multimedia object would not display.
- Malicious designers could conceivably introduce security risks through the use of plug-ins.

Soon afterwards Microsoft got on the bandwagon with it's own version of plug-ins for Internet Explorer. They called their version ActiveX and made them a little more automatic (by adding some custom code to the operating system). Ask anyone at Microsoft (especially at the training classes) and you be told that the future is ActiveX. However, these controls have exactly the same problem as plug-ins with a terrible security model to boot (any security model which requires an end-user to make a decision as to whether or not unknown code is trustworthy is certain to fail).

Okay, how does this all relate to graphics? Well, plug-ins and ActiveX controls are the way you can expand the functions of your browser to include new and occasionally wonderful things.

Plug-ins include:

- Macromedia flash (quickly becoming one of the most popular formats)
- Adobe Acrobat Reader (now the standard for web document publication)
- Quicktime (a video format)
- Shockwave (another popular plug-in)
- Real Player (a very compressed video and audio format)

There are hundreds (and perhaps thousands) of other plug-ins and ActiveX controls available for your browser.

Web Site Design Notes

Okay, this is all fine and dandy, but do you really need or want plug-ins on your web site? Well, that's up to you. Some of the reasons for including plug-ins are:

- You can make your web site more interesting and different.
- Plug-ins can be fun to use
- You can add things to your web site that cannot otherwise be added

Why wouldn't you want to include plug-ins?

- They tend to scare away visitors who don't know what they are

- Your pages become unattractive or non-functional if your visitors do not choose to download and install the plug-in
- If the provider of the plug-in ceases business operations, then you may be stuck with a website that you cannot maintain or improve
- Plug-ins are often frowned upon because they add a security risk to your visitors systems, they require long downloads (and sometimes reboots for installation), and they can make systems unstable.
- Your site sometimes inherits the reputation of the plug-in. For example, many people consider Comet Cursors to be spyware and very intrusive (as well as obnoxious and unnecessary) and will not visit your site if you've got those on your pages. Thus, your site may be considered "bad" even though it might be excellent.

In general, Flash, Shockwave, Acrobat, and Real player are pretty safe bets. If you want to improve your site with plug-ins, these will do well.

Surfing Notes

Here's the strange thing about plug-ins (as well as ActiveX controls) - they require you (the surfer) to make a decision: do you or don't you trust the source of this software?

Personally, I have learned through long and hard experience a golden rule of owning or using a personal computer:

The less you install on your computer system, the more stable your computer will be.

You see, plug-ins, especially ActiveX Controls, tend to install things into your system - things over which you have no control. Worse yet, plug-ins need to be updated - which means a formerly safe plug-in may become unsafe due to sloppy coding practices or other problems.

My advice is very simple. I have installed the major plug-ins: Acrobat, Flash, Shockwave and Real Player. These are made by large companies and have established track records for safety and value. There are a few other plug-ins which are reasonably safe: Crescendo comes to mind. I would use extreme caution when installing other plug-ins and especially ActiveX controls. If you don't know, and I mean know without a shadow of a doubt, that the thing is safe, then don't install it. If you do decide to install something, make sure you've got a good backup of your system and data.

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