

/Graphics/speed up Photoshop

Refine your working methods in Photoshop to get through repetitive tasks more quickly and you'll soon be meeting deadlines early, says Tom Kershaw

Knowledge needed Photoshop CS3

Requires Photoshop CS3

Project time Less than usual!

Every designer uses Photoshop. I've been using it for over 10 years and I'm still finding new tricks and learning different ways to do things. As with all good software packages, there are lots of ways to accomplish your goals and many ways to speed up repetitive tasks.

Over my career I have learned a lot of these, sometimes from fellow designers and sometimes by accident. In my current role at Molecular (www.molecular.com), I've helped to develop best practices for our design team, and a large chunk of those practices are Photoshop techniques.

Photoshop has many different areas to master. There are a lot of tools specifically for photographers that a designer will barely touch. Similarly, there are many web editing functions that photographers won't need. The following tips are intended for interactive designers.

The right etiquette

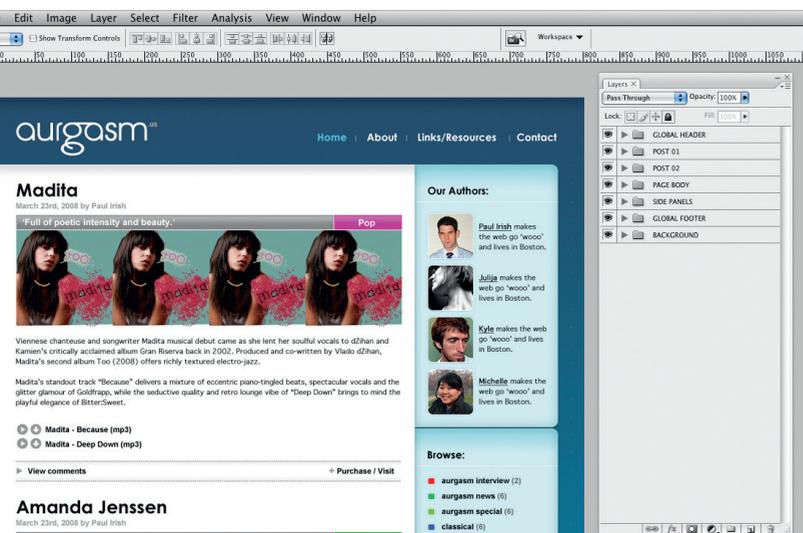
When working in Photoshop, there are a number of things you can do to keep your file organised, both for yourself and for others you share it with. A lot of projects involve designers picking up another's work at various times in a project cycle. Sometimes the designer who created the PSD is no longer with the company, or on vacation, so if there are missing elements in a file or it has been flattened then this can cause time-wasting issues. I've just finished a project where we were tasked with the design only, no technical build. This meant the final deliverable was a set of PSDs that the client would build

from. I had to make sure the files I delivered were top-notch and not missing anything. As a general rule, you should try to name your PSD in relation to the site map or the order it appears in the flow of a site. I usually name the homepage – 00_projectname_home.psd and then following on from that 01, 02, 03 etc. If you need to have multiple states in one page then this works too: 01.1, 01.2, 01.3 and so on. Naming the files correctly keeps everything in order and will also help when exporting as flat JPGs for presentations. Another file naming trick we use on my team is to add your initials to the end of a filename. This will help you to quickly identify who worked on the file without looking at the file information or opening up the document.

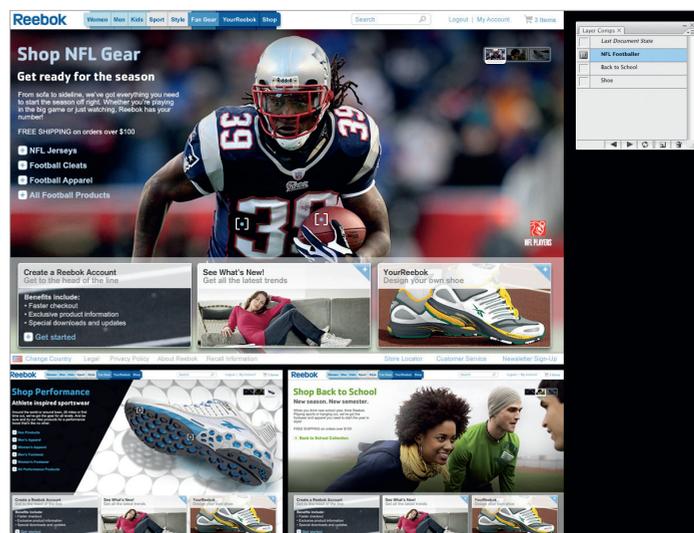
Organise your layers

It's good practice to organise the elements on your page into layer groups (I call them folders because that's what they look like). As a general rule, try to split pieces of the design up into logical, standalone bits, and organise the layer groups so they match the hierarchy in which they appear on the canvas. So, an example homepage might have GLOBAL HEADER at the top, then GLOBAL NAV, MAIN PROMOTION, CONTENT BOX ONE, NEWSFEED and GLOBAL FOOTER at the bottom. It's so much easier to move your page elements around if they're all neatly structured in groups.

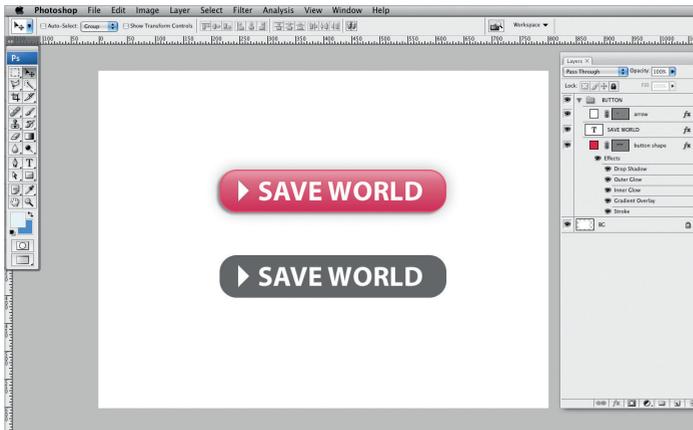
Remember to name your layers properly. This can be time-consuming, but if you get into the habit of doing this it makes a big difference later on when you have hundreds of layers. I name layer groups with capital letters and layers in lower case. Always delete any unused layers to save file size and lessen confusion for others who pick up the file. What we want to avoid is a layer palette with meaningless redundant layers called layer 23, layer 47, shape 12 and so on. Messy and pointless!



Sound structure The layer groups here are structured to make up the design I'm working on. They're arranged to match the hierarchy of elements on the page



Unique comps This layout has three parts to it, so layer comps come in extremely handy. You can see each of the three versions is recorded as a unique layer comp



Easy effects With buttons it's easier to use layer effects for shading and dimension so you can edit or remove them. This shows the button with and without effects applied

“What we want to avoid is a layer palette with meaningless redundant layers”

I keep all the images for a project in an assets folder on my hard drive. When I drag them into Photoshop, I try to keep the image in its original form as one layer, and then for any edits I do to it I'll use a duplicate layer. This helps if you need to go back to the original, and it's also very handy if you pass on the file to someone two months later and they need the image but can't find the original. You should always be thinking: 'What if I need to go back to this?' If you want to crop, feather or fade an image, do this with a mask. I prefer to either apply a mask directly to the image layer or put the image and any applicable layers in a layer group that has a mask applied to it. I just find this quicker and less fiddly.

Smart objects

Smart objects are useful for elements on a page that you want to be able to scale, edit and reuse numerous times. Just like a Flash movieclip, you can edit your smart object and it will update all instances of itself in your design, saving a lot of time. This is also extremely useful for collaborative work, as you can ensure a PSD you pass to a fellow designer has every detail editable. I've been frustrated when a PSD has been passed on to me containing flattened buttons and logos. I couldn't modify or scale them, and had to spend time looking for the logo or recreating the button from scratch. Pointless.

Just now I talked about arranging your page elements into groups. You can take this a step further with smart objects. For global elements in designs such as the main navigation, it's useful to create every rollover state etc, and then convert the whole layer group into a smart object. This speeds up Photoshop's performance by reducing the amount of layers it has to have in memory.

If you're working with a team of designers on the same project, chances are you may all be taking different pages to comp up, and those pages will have shared elements. Say I'm working on the global navigation and I make some changes to it: I can save my navigation smart object as a separate file. So, double-click on the smart object layer. When the smart object opens up as a separate document, do **File > Save as** and save the PSB file as **global_nav.psb**. You can then put this on your shared working folder for the team to update their files. Updating is a breeze: on the navigation smart object layer, Ctrl+click and choose **Replace contents**, then choose the file that's saved on the server. The old navigation will be swapped out with the new one, in exactly the same position.

Layer effects

When you have elements on your page that have layer effects applied to them, be sure to keep them all consistent by copying the layer style and pasting it to subsequent new layers. You can do this quickly by Ctrl-clicking on the layer and choosing the appropriate commands.

In depth Aurgasm's Paul Irish explains how to get the job done without hassle



Paul Irish

Occupation Ajax developer and MP3 blogger

Areas of expertise Front-end development, open-standards interaction, experience design

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.net: What can designers do to make the developer's life easier when working in Photoshop?

PI: For a front-end developer, image slicing is largely a matter of isolating visual features, trimming and exporting as PNG or adding to a CSS sprite. Having clearly named layers is helpful, but more importantly, grouping them in layer groups and defining states with layer comps makes layer navigation a lot more straightforward.

Many developers don't know Photoshop as well as you, so a small bit of education will go far. Teaching them how to use **Trim** and **Layer select** with Alt+right-click (or Cmd+Ctrl+Opt-click) will help when they're diving in and out of your myriad of layers.

Denote all hover and active states for navigation elements, as well as hover and visited states for links. If the site will contain user-generated content, comps should define the treatment of lists, inline images and all headlines.

.net: Sometimes it's frustrating for designers when typography cannot be replicated accurately when building out a page. Do you have any advice on this?

PI: You'll see the most accurate results if you and your developer agree on pixel sizes for all type and leading. Margins before and after all headlines, paragraphs and textual elements can be custom, and your developers will appreciate your specificity.

Designers should embrace the new Vista fonts (Calibri, Candara, etc) and then the standbys of Arial and Verdana et al. But sIFR (novemberborn.net/sifr3) and Facelift/FLIR (facelift.mawhorter.net/) open up your options for rich typography if the performance compromises are acceptable.

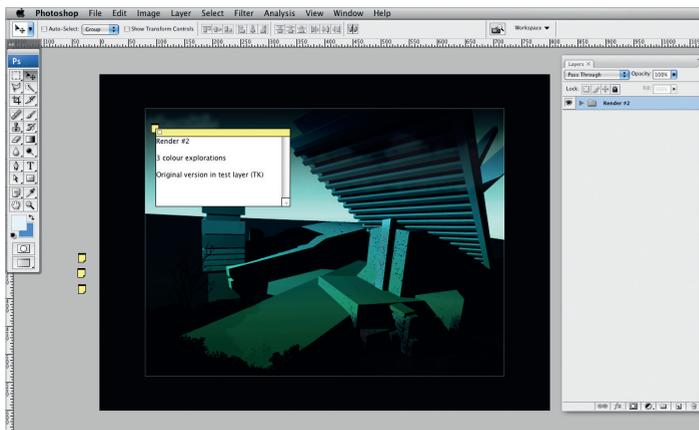
Layer effects can be extremely useful for making page elements such as buttons, because you can quickly apply or remove shadows and glows, which comes in handy for rollovers. The colour overlay effect is one I use a lot. It's really useful for making different coloured versions of an icon or logo without creating a brand new smart object. It simply coats the smart object with the hue of your choice. I also use this filter for rollovers.

Layer comps

I'm always surprised how many designers (even experienced ones) aren't using the **Layer comps** feature of Photoshop. It's so incredibly useful. When you're designing a site you need to show different states or different versions of a page. Using the **Layer comps** palette you can do this all in the same document and share various assets, cutting down on work.

Layer comps are basically a snapshot of the state of the **Layers** palette. There are three settings you can use: **Layer visibility**, **Layer position** and **Layer appearance**. I use **Layer visibility** mostly, as the other two settings can get complicated. For example, let's say I have a homepage and I want to show three versions to the client, each one with a different background image. I can create three different background layers and then make one of them visible in the **Layers** palette. With this first background layer option visible, in the **Layer comp** palette I click the **Create a new layer comp** button and name it **home_background_01**. This has created my first layer comp with the first background option. To create the remaining two options, I turn the visibility of the first background off, then turn on background two and create a layer comp, and the same for background three. I now have three layer





Take note Sometimes when I'm messing with visuals in Photoshop I like to make notes to remind myself what I was actually doing! Make sure that you keep the notes off the editable area and you won't go bananas ...

>> comps; when I click each one I'm presented with my homepage with the different background designs.

You can do this by turning the layers on and off and ignore the layer comps, but when you start to make versions of your design with different content areas, variations of navigations and so on, layer comps are invaluable.

And this is the best bit: you can export your layer comps as files super-fast. In the **File** menu, under **Scripts**, there is a command **Layer comps to files**. Run this, choose your file type and sit back while Photoshop does the work. The filenames will be the same as the name of your layer comps, hence the correct naming. The other two layer comp options, as I mentioned earlier, can be tricky. **Layer position** enables you to take a snapshot of a layer or layer group's position, and then you can move it and take a snapshot for another layer comp. The problem I've found with this is mainly when sharing files with other designers. If you move an element and forget to update all the layer comps, you can have stuff in different locations on your canvas and it turns into a nightmare.

The **Layer appearance** option enables you to record blending modes, so for example you can set the opacity of a layer and create a layer comp for that opacity. You can also add a glow to a layer and record that. This is useful for rollovers. Try it out, but I prefer not to use it for the same reason as I tend not to use the **Layer position** option. It can be tricky when sharing the file amongst other designers if they aren't familiar with all the layers.

Be pixel perfect

Wherever possible, try to use vector shapes for all shapes in your design. This may seem obvious but some designers still draw boxes using the **Marquee** tool and fill. A common problem with vector shapes is edge blurring. This is when the vector shape edge isn't sitting exactly on a pixel, and the edges aren't sharp. To sort this, you need to zoom in as far as the **Zoom** tool will allow, and then use the **Direct selection** tool to shift the edge until it's neat.

A unified practice amongst my team is consistent spacing. We try to make sure all the elements on the page are spaced in increments of 5 or 10 pixels. It's just so much easier to know that when you pick up someone else's file, all their elements will be spaced the same amount, saving you time measuring everything. You can use the **Shift** key when moving an object with the arrow key to space things out in increments of 10 pixels. I'm not saying that you should always space stuff in 5 or 10 pixel increments, but if you do have a rule on a comp for how things are spaced, jot it down in a note so other designers will know what to look for.

Leave a trail

It's very useful to add your details to the **File > File info** menu. In all honesty, there are so many fields of data in this menu and I never use much of it, but simply putting your name in the author box is useful. This way, another designer can find out who created the document. Consequently, you'll know who to chase should you have any questions, or who to shoot if they've flattened something you need unflattened!

I also like to make notes with the **Annotation** tool. Admittedly the annotation post-its can get annoying, but if you keep them off the document's editable

In depth Rory MacDonald of Made discusses workflow on the Flash platform



Rory MacDonald

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.net: How can new and existing technologies be utilised to improve the designer/developer workflow when creating Flash content?

RM: In days gone by, every Flash developer and company I worked with had their own set of rules that the designer(s) had to adhere to in supplying assets. Over the last couple of years, I've noticed a real push towards standardising these rules, through the release of toolkits and new products aimed to alleviate the pain that we'd all previously been through.

Flex 3 was probably the first real step towards this standardisation. It unified the codebase developers were using, enabling Adobe to create toolkits such as the Flex Skin Design Extensions (tinyurl.com/flexskins). This extension allows the designer to customise the look and feel of all the Flex components using their application of choice, and then export these skins in a format that developers can drop in easily, making light work of what was previously a laborious task.

With the latest release of the CS Suite, Adobe have released a new file format called FXG, which is supported by all its major applications. This format is a subset of MXML, meaning that anything a designer creates using these applications should be easy to incorporate into a Flex development cycle. Alongside this, there's also the imminent release of a new product called Flash Catalyst (labs.adobe.com/technologies/flashcatalyst/), which will allow the designer to add basic interactivity during the design phase, and then to easily pass this across to the developer to begin coding with.

These new features are things the community have been expecting to see since Adobe acquired Macromedia in 2005. Hopefully this means we are on the way to a new era of designers and developers working together more efficiently and collaboratively.

area, they aren't so bad. If I get an idea while working on one layout I'll jot it down so I can come back to it later. I actually use real post-its to list out tasks I need to do for the day, but the digital versions are great for making sure others get all the information they need.

Include all options

Make sure you tie up all loose ends on your design. This will prevent the stressed-out developer asking you, "What happens when you rollover this?" Including rollover states, drop-downs, highlights and expanded menus in your comp gives those guys all they need to build the site. It's good practice to include several layer comps with all the different states of navigation.

There are a few things I tend to do a lot, so I create actions and droplets for them. This is pretty standard stuff, but something good to share. I always have a 'Save as jpg' action and droplet assigned to my F1 key. This action exports as a high quality JPG to a specified images folder on my desktop. I can then quickly batch a whole set of comps to get them ready to show to a client. ●



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Areas of expertise | Interactive design, art direction, branding, Flash design

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