

A FLASH IN THE PAN

Flash API with its vector-based environment supports Web-based mapping applications better than HTML, but Internet giants such as Google and Yahoo seem to have undermined the strong developer support and capabilities of Flash



Kevin MacDonald
Web Mapping Architect
loxcel.cluster@gmail.com

Google and Yahoo recently shut down their Web map APIs. It wasn't supposed to happen this way.

I remember reading what Mike Jones of the Google Maps API team said back in May 2008: "I get excited just thinking about the creative ways developers might take advantage of having a Flash API for Google Maps ... Smoothness and speed are a big part of it."

In the ensuing three years, enthusiasm didn't parlay into developer interest. So Google pulled the plug – on their Flash API.

Steve Jobs and his disciples don't like Flash. Neither do HTML 5 advocates, who believe the Web should use HTML only. HTML is fine for textual content, but maps are different and can really benefit from a vector-based environment, like Flash. Adobe deserves some responsibility for Flash's tarnished reputation. Their Acrobat Reader and its ever-expanding feature set present an ever-expanding attack surface to hackers.

As a result, Flash didn't grow beyond its firmament of banner ads and online gaming.

So, Google halted development of their Flash API. Features added to their wildly popular JavaScript API will not appear in their Flash API. And unless you're a paying Premier client, Google will not support you through their Developer Relations forums or other online channels. Their Flash API should remain operational until September 2, 2014, three years from their deprecation announcement. But Google's Terms of Service offers wiggle room to terminate support even earlier.

The deprecation of their Flash API has closed a door for Google. Flash – not HTML 4 or 5 – provides vector-for-vector parity with a PC's native graphics API. Flash allows a Web map to render overlays and polygons as if it was running natively on the desktop. See for yourself at spatialkey.com, which uses the MapQuest Flash API.

Unlike Google, which shuttered only part of its map API portfolio, Yahoo shut down the whole thing: Flash, JavaScript and static. Maps such as bedbugregistry.com and www.townkings.com that use the Yahoo APIs will need new homes for their bedbugs and social divas. Yahoo's decision reflects their recent economic troubles and disinterest from the developer community (According to programmableweb.com, Yahoo map APIs trail Google and Bing in popularity).

Flash is a strong desktop platform with strong developer support.

Flash 11 is coming soon with 64-bit support, and according to Computer Graphics World, its new 3D accelerated graphics will "deliver sophisticated 3D experiences across almost every computer ... connected to the Internet."

Google Maps' abandonment of Flash means a future anchored in the technology of Internet Explorer 7. A world of simple info windows and markers.

Mike Jones from Google believes "Flash allows for much greater embellishment," which is why I applaud MapQuest and spatialkey.com as they continue to support their Flash API.

Perhaps MapQuest sees something that Google has missed. 