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The grand masters of Flash

Flash trailblazers 2Advanced sit down with Web Designer to talk about how they like to push the envelope, embrace new technologies and use their own website as a virtual playground

who 2Advanced Studios **what** Long-established digital creative agency
where 32 Journey, Suite 200, Aliso Viejo, CA 92656 **web** www.2advanced.com

2ADVANCED STUDIOS

Left to right, Elder 'Junior' Jerez, Tony Novak and Sket One form a creative huddle in 2Advanced HQ

2Advanced Studios is a small interactive agency nestled away in California somewhere between Los Angeles and San Diego that has been designing like mad for well over a decade. Founded in early 1999, by Tony Novak, Eric Jordan and John Carroll, the three friends came together to form their own vision of an interactive agency after becoming thoroughly disenchanted with the Dotcom hysteria of that time. Having all served 'hard-time' in a now defunct Dotcom design agency, the founders gained two valuable insights: nobody seems to care about the quality of their design and 20-hour days absolutely suck (especially in light of the first insight). As such, the three left the venture, which anecdotally was named 'Design Insites', to embark on their own adventure. Starting in 1999, Eric's personal work portfolio, known then only as '2Advanced.com', received a burst of industry attention as it had been nominated to one of the first Flash film festivals and featured in the friends of ED classic, *New Masters of Flash*. Using this exposure as a springboard, the founders began working stealthily during their few remaining 'off hours' to produce a number of freelance jobs that would provide a small nest-egg of income and, more importantly, the confidence to quit their jobs and devote their efforts full time – and thus 2Advanced Studios was born.

Over the past 12 years the company has provided a wide range of services from its core offering of web design and development, to an endless stream of Flash-related projects and the team – Eric Jordan most notably – were dubbed as 'Masters of Flash' very early on in the company's journey. At one time in 2Advanced's history, it could have been said that Flash design on the whole (comprising motion graphics and ActionScript development) accounted for more than 95 per cent of the work 2Advanced performed. But, as with everything, times change and technologies evolve. The demand for Flash today is still very much out there, but as the industry has come to understand its practical use and newer, exciting tools such as HTML5 and CSS3 have emerged, 2Advanced estimates that today less than 30 per cent of its output is predominantly Flash oriented.

However, following the adage that 'a rolling stone gathers no moss', the founders of 2Advanced continue in their relentless pursuit for new methodologies, emerging ideas and bleeding-edge tech. Today, the agency has an arsenal of core competencies on offer, continuing its passion for the web with HTML5, CSS3, jQuery and PHP development, but also further expanding its artistic horizons through its Flash, motion and 3D artists. Now in

Key clients

Namco Bandai
Games (America
and Japan),
Activision, Mattel,
Motorola, Rapp
Collins Worldwide

2011 the agency has enjoyed the challenge of combining the myriad specialities that the 2Advanced team have excelled at over the years and further pushing the envelope for their clients. And speaking of clients, the agency has worked for Namco Bandai Games, Activision, Warner Brothers Interactive, Rapp Collins Worldwide, Ford, Mattel, Motorola, T-Mobile, Adobe, Nintendo, Sony Entertainment, Electronic Arts, O'Neill Sports and Dakine, just to name a few of the more recent ones from well over 500 different clients during the last dozen years.

Further, as a core part of the agency's design and development focus, in 2009 nearly half of the 2Advanced team were introduced to the new world of mobile app development. In support of this commitment, the experts under Aaron Hillegass at Big Nerd Ranch were flown in to deliver a ten-day, hardcore iOS development 'boot camp'. As of 2011, the studio has now delivered a handful of examples for the iOS and Android platforms and is currently engaged in multiple new projects that will be released soon. Likewise, the new 'social' revolution is very real and therefore it is probably not a surprise that the company has turned its sights to delivering Facebook-based solutions – especially given the importance of Flash in the arena of Facebook app development.

2Advanced have been around so long they can easily be described as trailblazers and pioneers in the world of online design. Back in the early days they might have been dubbed the Masters of Flash, but co-founder Tony Novak explains how the agency has evolved: "Since inception, we have gained an invaluable wealth of knowledge. We have had a great deal of fabulous successes and our share of a few miserable failures along the way. Nevertheless, 2Advanced continues to prosper here now in 2011 and one of the greatest lessons learned has been to covet a non-stop, relentless pursuit towards design technology. We strongly believe that if we had settled all of our endeavours purely to one technology – ie Flash – we'd have shut our doors long ago. The nature of our industry and the landscape of design is that it is constantly evolving. One minute a new technology becomes hot, and several others get left behind as if they never existed."

Originally, the 2Advanced moniker belonged to co-founder Eric Jordan, who used it for his personal online portfolio. He explains why they stuck with the name while fellow co-founder Tony Novak reveals the importance of a URL as a brand extension.

EJ: "When we originally decided to go with the name 2Advanced Studios, it was an easy decision, because we had an amazing level of traffic that had already been generated out of the success of **www.2advanced.com**, so we simply tacked on the 'Studios' to announce to the world that 2Advanced was [no longer] a one-man show. I believe

that some have misconstrued the meaning of our name to be something of a boast… It's been said that we see ourselves as 'too advanced' for everyone else. Totally wrong. The perception we have always tried to convey falls to our work product and quality of thought that we put behind our designs. For us, 2Advanced has always represented the next level of what our work can be, and a reminder that there are always new challenges ahead."

TN: "In terms of the importance of an agency name and URL, we see these as paramount extensions of both our brand and our work. Our sales team is 50 per cent human and 50 per cent portfolio, as people go to great lengths to seek out representative examples of good work on the internet before they approach an agency. If you play in the top tier, along with the advertising agencies that spend months/years actively soliciting major accounts, your name and portfolio aren't necessarily your key sales assets. However, for the majority of us smaller agencies, this is the differentiator. For many years, **www.2advanced. com** has served all of our marketing needs and has really been the key factor in getting our phones ringing. That said, we placed our stock in our name and URL in order to demonstrate our capabilities and ultimately save our sanity from participating in the top SEO placement battles. Now, 12 years later, we can today boast an average 40k in page views each day (1.2m per month) with 100 per cent of our sales activity coming in from web-related enquiries".

2Advanced has long had a strong connection with the Flash platform and its own online presence reflects its commitment to the popular web technology. Co-founders Eric and Tony talk about how the 2Advanced site is in many ways their virtual 'playground'.

EJ: "Following Tony's prior comments, the business importance of the 2Advanced website is pretty clear. But we have also come to realise that, for us, the 2Advanced website represents our very own 'playground'. When we want to break from being told how and what to design, we always have the 2Advanced website to represent our experiments, our evolution and our core. For this reason, 2Advanced has recently released its sixth iteration of massive redesign and this one taught us many new important lessons. I believe many were expecting us to totally abandon Flash this time around, but it's still in our blood and we enjoy working with the Flash platform. So, while the rest of the world makes important decisions for themselves and many of the agencies abandon Flash to demonstrate their HTML5 skills, we sat back and reminded ourselves of the fact that Flash is still the catalyst that has bound our team and our company."

TN: "Couldn't have said it better. In fact our biggest mistake on our latest website iteration is probably that it came four years after the prior version. We had become so consumed with our client work that we simply never took the time out for ourselves. We started receiving fan messages here in 2011 saying things along the lines of 'What gives? Your portfolio hasn't been updated in over 18 months!' It was a horrible slap in the face but an important reminder. We had basically left our marketing department out in the cold for too long, and it was frozen solid. So, we regrouped and sequestered a few key players to focus entirely on the V6 website."

Director of 3D, Baz Pringle

Director of Interactive, Brad Jackson

Left to right: founders John Carroll, Eric Jordan and Tony Novak

2A office, from outside

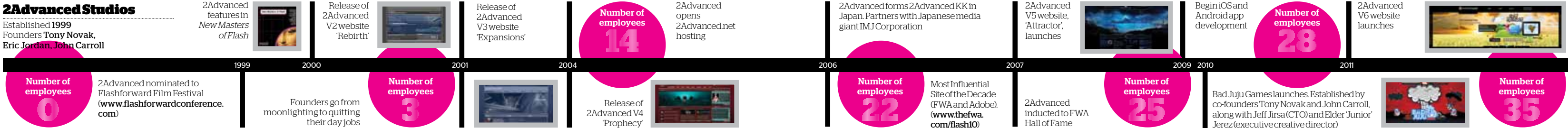Executive office, plus Tony and Eric toys

KEY PROJECT

Bad Juju Games

www.badjuju.com

Of the recent projects we have been most proud to tout here, we are very excited about the work we did for our newest division: Bad Juju Games. In particular, we embarked on a massive campaign that was our opportunity to experience the entire client engagement from brand development to launch. Starting with a very basic idea - mobile videogame development - we researched names for weeks before arriving at Bad Juju Games, which we believed had just the right balance of attitude and image. But we loved the name, and had to shell out a few extra bucks to get the domain.

Next came branding, the one thing that on the whole we believe videogames companies tend to neglect. We surveyed the entire industry for the best and worst examples before embarking on our own study to come up with the Bad Juju identity. In the end, our associate creative director, Sket One [Andrew Yasgar], who also moonlights as an amazing graffiti artist and toy designer came up with the winning idea of Dripple as our main character; he is the foundation of the Bad Juju brand.

From there, the process was quite clear; a few rounds of comps, iterations on the style guide, and an intense debate that ended up with the Bad Juju Games website constructed entirely in HTML5, CSS3, WebKit and jQuery. Moreover, there's a lot of transition-based animations going on, which were quite tricky to pull off given the landscape of browser clients still providing lacklustre implementations in support of these technologies.

Nevertheless, the brand came together over 30 days of deep deliberation, and the site itself was designed and built in just six days. It's simply amazing what can be accomplished once all the other roadblocks are removed. In short, it's a very simple site loaded with some rather advanced features. The Bad Juju Games project is quite dear, as it has served its business purpose, but has also given us great insight into the trials and tribulations of some of the more advanced front-end development technologies.

2Advanced Studios

Established **1999**
Founders **Tony Novak, Eric Jordan, John Carroll**

Year	Event
	Number of employees 0 — 2Advanced nominated to Flashforward Film Festival (**www.flashforwardconference.com**)
1999	2Advanced features in *New Masters of Flash*
2000	Release of 2Advanced V2 website 'Rebirth' — Founders go from moonlighting to quitting their day jobs
	Number of employees 3
2001	Release of 2Advanced V3 website 'Expansions'
	Number of employees 14 — 2Advanced opens 2Advanced.net hosting
2004	Release of 2Advanced V4 'Prophecy'
2006	2Advanced forms 2Advanced KK in Japan. Partners with Japanese media giant IMJ Corporation — **Number of employees 22** — Most Influential Site of the Decade (FWA and Adobe). (**www.thefwa.com/flash10**)
2007	2Advanced V5 website, 'Attractor', launches — 2Advanced inducted to FWA Hall of Fame
	Number of employees 25
2009 2010	Begin iOS and Android app development — Bad Juju Games launches. Established by co-founders Tony Novak and John Carroll, along with Jeff Jirsa (CTO) and Elder 'Junior' Jerez (executive creative director)
	Number of employees 28
2011	2Advanced V6 website launches — **Number of employees 35**

Big brand names are certainly not uncommon in the 2Advanced portfolio. Tony Novak and executive creative director Elder 'Junior' Jerez reveal their thoughts on what this might mean to prospective clients.

TN: "It's quite possible that, over time, we've gained a reputation for being at the more expensive end of the spectrum and big-name brands in the portfolio may also drive this factor home. But we cannot say that there's been any shortage of opportunities showing up daily for new clients, and we still field the entire gamut of sales enquiries from startups to well-established names. In truth, we service a wide range of clients and our expansion of service offering has played a key factor in this process."

EJ: "As a creative agency, our focus is adapting to offer a wider breadth of new technologies. On the whole, interactive has pushed far beyond web, as now we have opportunities in the mobile industry as well as a great deal of call for the next great 'social' idea. In any event, our reputation for working with big-name brands has definitely made our process much easier in many ways. Having successfully delivered with the companies in our portfolio, our team has gained a great deal of credibility, which in turn plays a valuable role in the client's selection process. Unfortunately, whether the client is a big name or otherwise, we still haven't figured out the magic formula to get clients to consistently deliver content and assets in a timely fashion – so, big, medium or startup, the dynamics in each engagement seem very much the same."

With a well-established reputation the team are in a position to be more selective of the projects they take on. Eric Jordan reveals it's not the size that matters but more the technology. "I wouldn't say that we get to fully pick and choose our clients, but it is quite true that we have several classes of prospects that we look forward to. In the past, we have enjoyed working on videogame properties, because very simply we are a company full of gaming addicts. But these days our team has enjoyed diving in deep with iOS and Android-based applications and games as well as anything social driven. Ideally, campaign-based projects that involve several deliverables reaching multiple platforms are the types of engagements that seem to rally the greatest interest here among the team. We have indeed been fortunate in the number of enquiries we receive, but we are still humble enough to realise that ultimately our clients choose 2Advanced, not the other way around. No, in fact the only projects that we routinely turn down are those dealing with highly controversial subject matters. We could have very easily made a killing long ago by cutting up nude women photos for some porn site purveyor with amazingly deep pockets – but that pretty much goes against everything we stand for."

The founders have an undoubted passion for the Flash platform which is reflected in the projects they have taken on. Tony Novak explains what Flash has brought to the agency. "To clarify our position, Flash has been an excellent tool that has served its purpose well over the years when nothing else existed. Now, as we see the technology evolution that is currently underway, we have quickly adapted our skillsets in order to support the full range of potential technologies for our clients. At the end of the day, we have always prided our philosophy to adapt to our clients' needs and requirements. There's actually a great deal that front-end technologies won't currently address at a practical level – take, for example, a Flash-based Facebook game like CityVille (which tends to be slow enough as is), but can anyone really imagine trying to pull off that level of interaction, animation, timed response and all the associated motion using the current arsenal of front-end technologies? However, when the requirements are set in advance and limitations are clearly adhered to, a project like the Beachhead level (*Call of Duty: Elite*) completed for Activision can be a wonderful candidate for a predominantly HTML/CSS/jQuery deliverable.

Flash is only a single tool and Eric unveils what other kit 2Advanced have hidden in their toolset. "We are actually less ab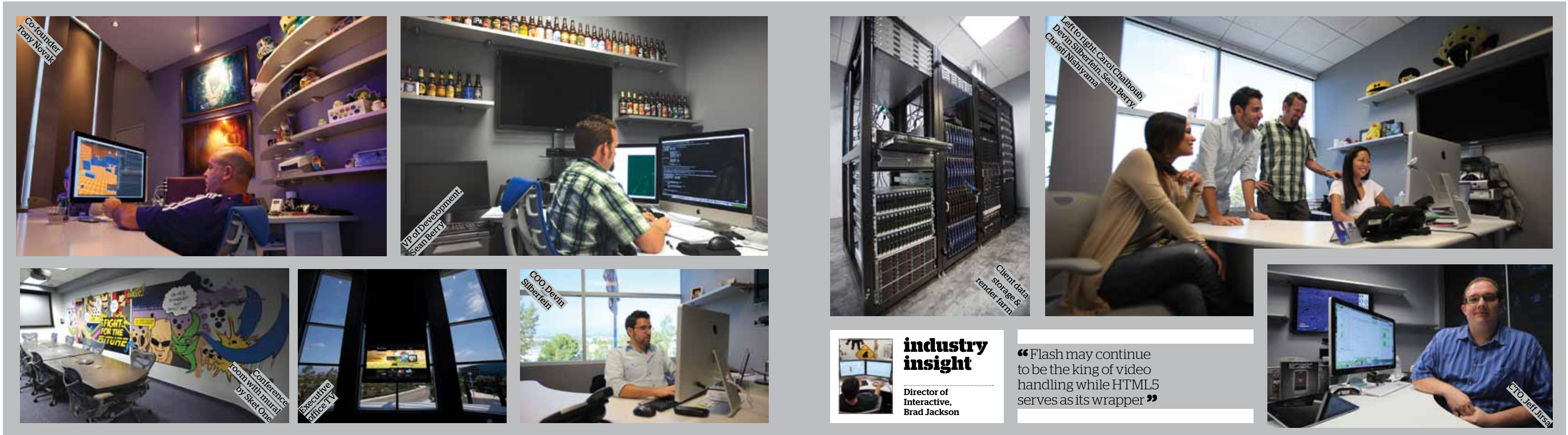out Flash today than other technologies on the whole, and we even tried Flash out for publishing to the iOS platform initially, but hit too many performance barriers to give this a serious second look. As such, for iOS and Android development we are using Unity3D and cocos2d in an effort to leverage cross-platform development and a single set of source code. On the design side, we are still strong proponents behind executing advanced animations and effects in apps such as CINEMA 4D or After Effects and then exporting the end results as needed into Flash. HTML5, CSS3 and jQuery have been hot on everyone's list to get up to speed with and we have been lucky enough to have several recent such projects for us to tackle. In fact, the new V6 release of 2Advanced marks our first cross-platform mobile HTML5 experience and even invokes the Touch API in support of 'swiping' between pages. For the development team, they are also spreading their wings as we are getting involved in much more complex back-end systems that are heavily leveraging PHP and Python but also go well beyond MySQL's capabilities to require more advanced distributed data solutions such as Cassandra and Redis."

HTML5, CSS3 and jQuery are considered serious rivals to the Flash platform. Creative director, Shane Mielke, co-founder Tony Novak and director of Interactive, Brad Jackson, give an insight into the competing technologies.

SM: "Flash took centre stage at a time when the only type of interaction that could be done in a site was simple JavaScript rollovers. Developers looked for ways to seamlessly integrate audio, video, fonts, transparency, motion and complex interaction into the rich experience the internet was meant to be. At that time mobile devices weren't surfing the web, browser differences and lack of standards made consistent layout rendering impossible and you couldn't send or receive data without a page refresh. At that time, Flash was the magic bullet that made all of those limitations fade away.

"The use of these new technologies and techniques to do basic animations, fonts, videos and data interaction is a

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Co-founder Tony Novak

VP of Development, Sean Berry

Conference room with mural by Sket One

Executive office's TV

COO Devin Silberfein

Client data storage & render farm

Left to right: Carol Chalhoub, Devin Silberfein, Sean Berry, Christi Nishiyama

CTO Jeff Jirsa

industry insight

Director of Interactive, Brad Jackson

> "Flash may continue to be the king of video handling while HTML5 serves as its wrapper"

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great adaptation to old challenges in new devices and browsers. They will most definitely replace Flash as the way we add these fundamental enhancements to the average website. Flash was never intended for many of the things we use it for on standard websites, but it stepped up to fill the void at the time. Even with this reality taking place in the browser, Flash will continue to be the most robust and powerful platform for creating immersive content, applications, games, mobile apps, interactive websites and online experiences."

TN: "Shane is absolutely right. In short there are some things that you simply cannot and will not be able to do with HTML5, CSS3 and jQuery – case in point, the recent Angry Birds capabilities demo for Google Chrome. On the whole, I have to commend them for a seriously close effort, but from a player's perspective, watching the game 'chug along' as I fired off a few birds served as a confirmation that there still exists a great deal of content that these technologies won't be able to address any time soon – if ever. So, the good news is that we get to move forward with new technologies in lieu of Flash (for the more basic interactions) and we get to once again focus on Flash when we need to really push the envelope. If anything, as the dust and hype begin to settle, we will likely all end up with some very defined clarity behind our technology choices."

BJ: "Let's also not forget that in terms of expressiveness, the biggest advantage Flash has is its IDE. You can open up Flash to instantly start drawing, animating and adding sound in an easy-to-understand interface. You publish your work, upload to a server and your creativity is there to see. On the flipside, the biggest disadvantage with the potentially powerful HTML5/jQuery/CSS3 is the lack of such a tool or environment. One of the reasons that Flash exploded in the early 2000s was because people discovered it was an easy way to make a website, and you didn't need to know a lick of HTML.

"There is no doubt this new tech will offer the capabilities to do what, at one time, Flash could only do. Right now, however, we are only seeing a taste of this power as the tools are immature, the spec is incomplete, and we still don't have 100 per cent compatibility across all platforms. Flash will likely continue as the de facto gaming platform (via Molehill), while letting HTML5 take over information. Flash may continue to be the king of video handling while HTML5 serves as its wrapper. There are lots of possibilities where I can see the two living together or separately, but at this point it's pure speculation."

One reason that Flash looked to be on the wane was Apple's lack of support, but Adobe has adapted to deal with the issue. Director of Interactive, Brad Jackson, gives his views on how this will affect the use of Flash. "Apple's decision to block Flash-authored apps on iOS for a period of time was a travesty for us initially. However, I also believe that Adobe did very little in terms of marketing the inroads and enhancements made in support of Flash-authored apps with CS5.5. In the end, Apple won over a great number of the development community (from a variety of different programming disciplines) because it appeared as though Xcode on Mac was going to end up as our only option for anyone interested in iOS publishing.

"Now, with the Adobe AIR SDK, it is true that there is an alternative, with which it is arguably much easier to accomplish the same thing – and it can be done with timelines! In general, I believe that it's not the day-to-day Flash developers that require convincing, as we are already fully aware. I believe that Adobe needs to turn its marketing attention towards the Apple community – those that believe Xcode is the only option – and perhaps they can revive the market opinion.

"Those that left may eventually return, but keep in mind there's a growing number of new tools, such as Unity3D that offer cross-platform compilation and an amazingly easy and intuitive development environment. So while those that left may come back, if they've already accomplished what they set out to do with other tools, why would they? If they love AS3 and miss the workflow of Flash, perhaps they will. These days, everyone and their dog wants an app to go with their 'next big product'. Those of us still using Flash now know we can deliver, and we can use the same tricks we've [used] for years."

Once a project is complete, it's time to hand over to the clients. 2Advanced's account director, Christi Nishiyama, explains the process: "At the end of any given project, we deliver all of the source files and assets to the client. Our contracts may vary slightly from others, as we operate on the premise that our clients own everything and are always free to move forward however they may see fit. We pride ourselves on our quality, workmanship and striving to maintain a solid relationship with our clients. Most commonly, we end up engaging in ongoing maintenance activities to help our clients keep their content fresh, thus encouraging repeat visitations.

"Our 24/7/365 support model means we always have a team standing by to help with last-minute content updates or to address any issues as they arise, and we can even offer an SLA with a one-hour initial response guarantee. For our larger clients, this level of availability has proven to be absolutely crucial, as many of their programs and needs are global in nature. In fact, it's quite rare that a major media buy or trailer release would fit anywhere into our typical 9am to 5pm window. Therefore, we offer a tremendous amount of flexibility to our clients, which in turn has helped them to achieve their goals efficiently and with as little stress as possible."

What makes an agency great is the creative minds that work there. COO, Devin Silberfein, gives some sound advice for those looking to take up a career in the industry. "For anyone looking to go big in the industry, it all starts with building a passionate online portfolio. We see nearly 100 portfolio submissions from candidates each week and it's sad how often we simply take a glance and move on. The truth is that an experienced eye can tell within a few moments if the passion is there.

"After dedication, we look for versatility. This is especially important for people stepping into the industry today since the technological landscape is mutating faster and faster each year. Our clients continue to come to us for cutting-edge work and we need people who stay on top of the latest creative trends and development platforms."

2ADVANCED STUDIOS

WEB..www.2advanced.com
FOUNDERS..............................Tony Novak (president), Eric Jordan (chief creative officer), John Carroll (chief strategy officer)
YEAR FOUNDED...1999
CURRENT EMPLOYEES...................................35
LOCATIONS.....................................Aliso Viejo, CA, USA Tokyo, Japan

SERVICES

Interactive design and development
  > Websites
  > Web applications
  > Facebook applications
  > Flash-based microsites
  > Online marketing campaigns
  > Rich media banners
  > Video production
  > 3D & 2D illustrations
  > Identity & branding
  > Audio production

iOS and Android app development