

# Managing Large Story Packages in Flash

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Managing the larger story package means managing pieces.

The story is going to be divided up into *segments*, or chunks, or chapters. These segments will be available in random order, or nonlinear order. They should be *titled* accordingly—that is, they should *not* be named Part 1, Part 2, etc.

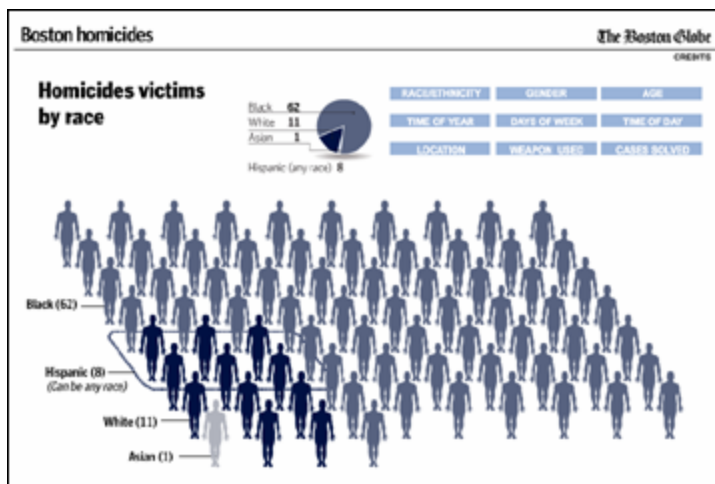
Deciding what the segments will be, and which aspects of the story belong in which segment, requires the kind of editorial thinking that journalists exercise every day.

This document is not about the editorial thinking.

This document explains how to manage the segments in Flash, the authoring tool you are most likely to work with if you create a larger online story package.

## Options for Handling Segments

Keeping everything in one single Flash file (one SWF) is an option *if the package is relatively simple*.



In this news graphic by Daigo Fujiwara of *The Boston Globe*, nine buttons in the upper right corner link to nine frames in the Flash file.

This is as simple as it gets! Nine pictures, nine buttons, no motion, no overlays. All nine buttons are available on every frame.

<http://www.boston.com/news/local/massachusetts/articles/2006/12/31/homicide/>

Even if a package includes some animation, it might be best to keep everything in one single Flash file. It depends whether the animation is short and simple, vs. long and complicated. It also depends on the file size of the images used.

Using multiple Flash files that are loaded into one container, or master file, is the other option. There are many cases where this will be the best choice for the story package.

## Flash Know-How You Will Need

**Buttons** and **button scripting** are the bare essentials for making anything work in Flash. I covered buttons thoroughly in my book, *Flash Journalism: How to Create Multimedia News Packages* (Focal Press: 2005), and there are many online tutorials too.

The button is what lets a user leave one segment and go to another.

In a simple, one-SWF package, the buttons will send the Flash Timeline to a **frame label**. (These are explained in detail in Lesson 5 in my book, and also in many online tutorials.) You might think of the frame label as a road sign that says “Exit 26 to Market Street.” Click the button that is scripted to go to that sign, and you’ll be on Market Street.

Knowing how to create and use an **empty movie clip** is essential for loading multiple Flash files into a container, or master file. Up until Flash CS3, there was one way to do this, and it is explained in this brief tutorial:

<http://www.flashjournalism.com/tips/emptymovieclip.htm>

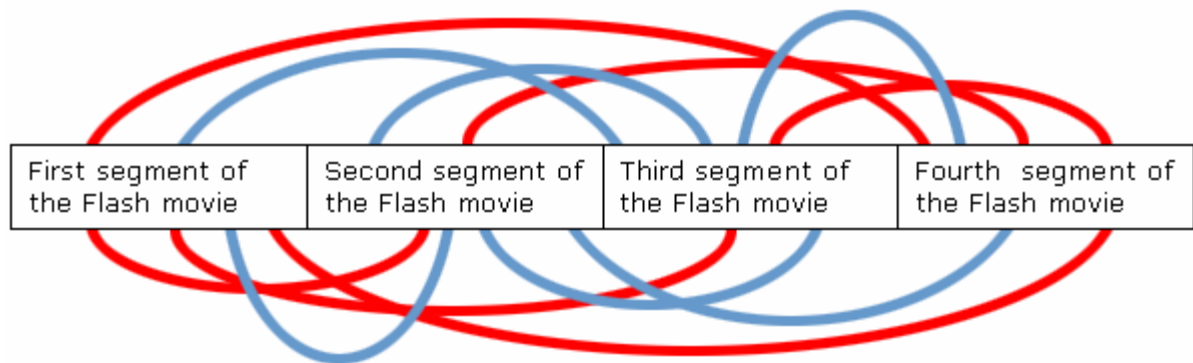
If you are using ActionScript 3, there’s a new and improved way to do it. You can be lazy (like me) and just use ActionScript 2, and then you can still use the old way. Or you can be very proper and learn ActionScript 3, with these instructions:

<http://livedocs.adobe.com/flash/9.0/ActionScriptLangRefV3/flash/display/Loader.html>

If you looked at those instructions and got scared, do not worry. I will never mention them again.

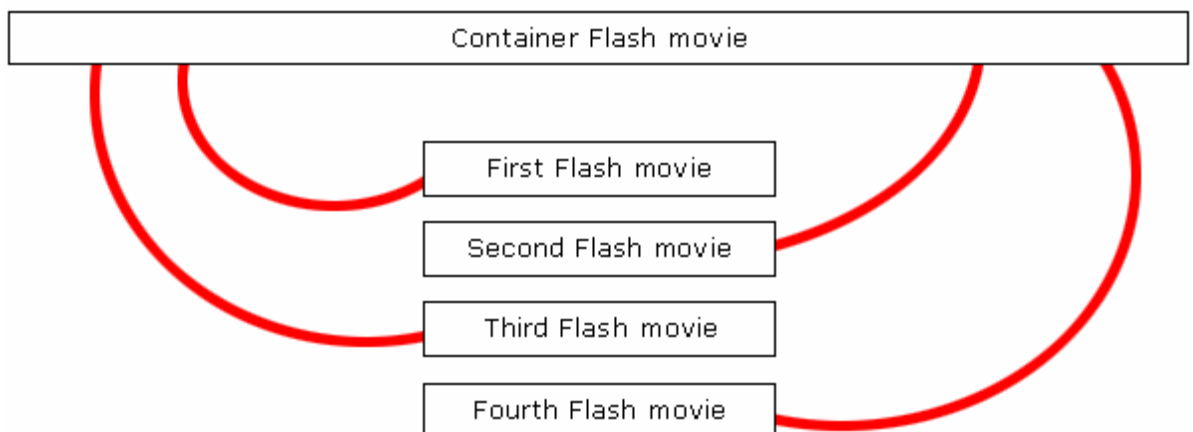
## How the Two Options Really Work

Let's look at a couple of diagrams to try to make all of this clear. Remember, either you will be in one single SWF, or you will be working with multiple SWFs.



**Above** is the single-SWF option. Everything in the package is in one Flash file. Buttons let the user jump from any segment to any other segment. If you have **four segments**, each one has **three ways out** and also **three ways in**.

**Below** is the multiple-SWF option. It can really simplify the process of designing a larger Flash journalism package. The illustration shows one container SWF, plus four external, separate SWF files that are loaded, one at a time, into the container.



Here is an illustrated online example of several external SWFs being loaded into one container SWF:

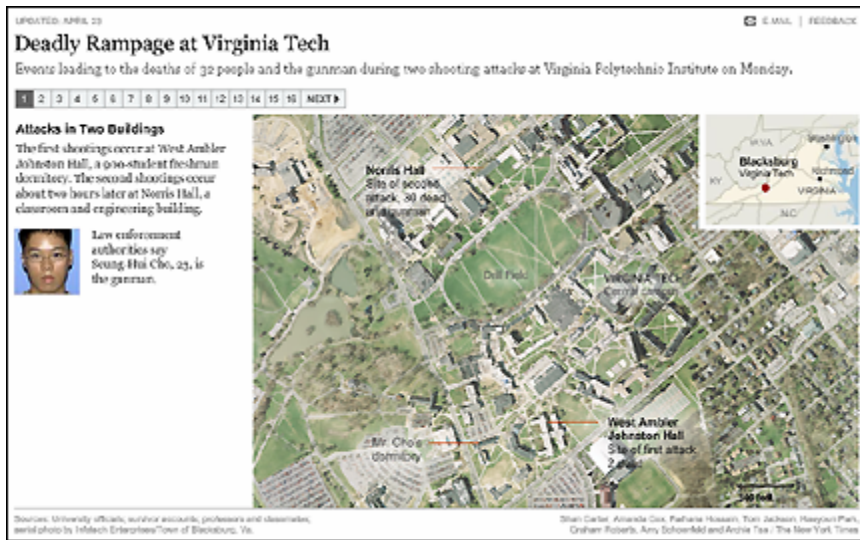
[http://www.macloo.com/examples/flash/external\\_swf\\_howto/index.htm](http://www.macloo.com/examples/flash/external_swf_howto/index.htm)

## A Third Option

You might also find that a two-SWF approach works well for some packages. In the container SWF, you create the overall heading, credits and navigation for the complete package. This often calls for only a **one-frame movie**: Many layers (in the Timeline), but only one frame.

In the loaded (external SWF), you create all of the animation, and give each sequence or segment its own unique frame label. The navigation in the container SWF will link to these frame labels inside the external SWF.

A sophisticated example of this is “Deadly Rampage at Virginia Tech,” a New York Times online graphic from April 23, 2007.



In this package, 16 buttons control the user’s path through several different animations. The map changes to show the location of two buildings on the campus.

The buildings themselves are shown, as 3D illustrations, and the interior of each building is also shown (also as 3D illustrations). All of these *move*. Of the 16 segments within this package, 12 include some kind of *animation*.

(1) Container SWF	(2) Loaded SWF
Header Buttons	All graphics and animation
Footer	

The **reason** for choosing to build the package in this way: it simplifies the navigation—and the ActionScript—for the designer and producer.

View the “Deadly Rampage” package from a **link** on this page:

<http://snipr.com/deadlyrampage>

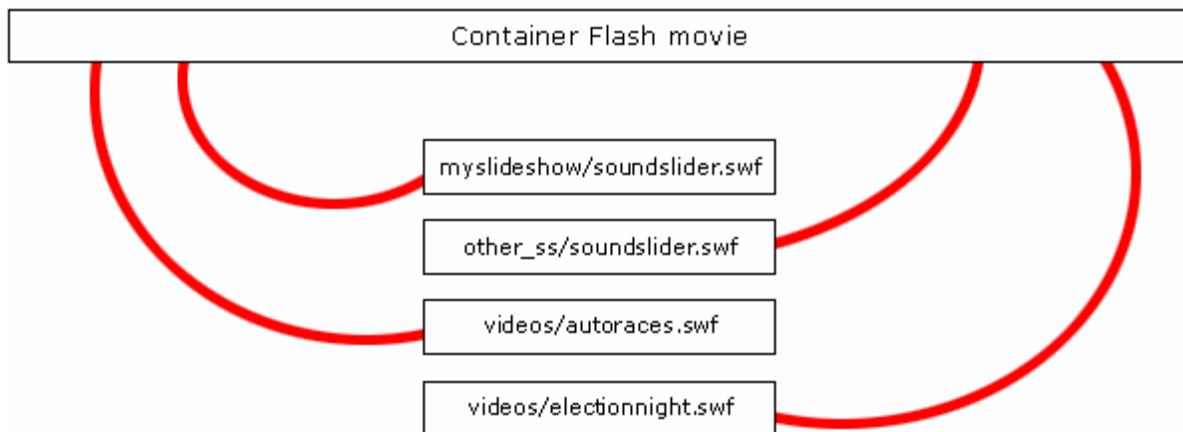
([http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/organizations/v/virginia\\_polytechnic\\_institute\\_and\\_state\\_university/index.html](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/organizations/v/virginia_polytechnic_institute_and_state_university/index.html))

## What About Videos and Soundslides?

Of course you can create an interface in Flash to play multiple Soundslides slide shows, and/or videos too.

Each **Soundslides** has a SWF, inside its “publish\_to\_web” folder. You can load that (external) SWF into a container SWF. All you need to know is the complete URL that leads to the Soundslides SWF on the server (ending in .swf).

Your **FLV video** may already be contained in a SWF. If so, it’s the same as a Soundslides—just get the exact URL to that SWF and load it into an empty movie clip (see page 2 of this handout).



You cannot load an FLV this way. If your video files are stand-alone FLVs, you’ll need a player interface to load them into (you know, with a play and pause button, etc.). One option is to get the free **JW FLV Player**:

<http://www.jeroenwijering.com/?item=Flash+Video+Player>

You can also build your own player from scratch, if you are so inclined.

## Conclusion

I realize I have not taken you step-by-step through the process of constructing one of these larger online journalism packages. It's a long process to document formally, and it would take a really long time to write it.

The first step, though, is to **sketch** and **write out**, as much as possible, the actions that will occur in each segment of the story package. For example, I have analyzed the "Deadly Rampage" package. Here is what I wrote down for segment No. 6 (which you will see if you are on segment No. 5 and click button No. 6):

1. Old text disappears.
2. Mask over the map moves; map goes away.
3. Graphic of the 2nd floor fades in.
4. Graphic of the bldg. fades out.
5. Graphic of 2nd floor moves forward and also tilts toward us.
6. New text and red circles appear.

Part of what this helps you to do is visualize the construction of the **layers** in the Flash Timeline. Should the "2nd floor" graphic be *above* or *below* the "bldg." graphic? Can that layer order be sustained for the entire SWF, or do you need to switch it?

Another thing I have not explained here is the use of **scenes**, which you can find on the Window menu (in Flash) under "Other Panels." In combination with **frame labels** (see page 2 of this document), scenes really simplify the authoring process because they free you to strip out **layers** you do not need.

## Comments

If you have comments about or suggestions for this document, please e-mail me at: **mmcadams |at| gmail |dot| com**

## More Resources

My blog, **Teaching Online Journalism**:

<http://tojou.blogspot.com/>

The Web site for my book, **Flash Journalism**:

<http://www.flashjournalism.com/>