a stitch in time

Twelve ways to speed up your Photoshop 5.5 Web work

By Wendy Peck

What separates a graphics pro from the rest of the design world? Experience and talent, of course, but pros also use software efficiently. Design and creativity flow best when you don't have to concentrate on the technical aspects of production, and software shortcuts help to shorten production time and ease frustration. Learning them is always a good investment.

Here, then, are a dozen time-saving tips to help you sail through your technical Web production tasks in Photoshop 5.5. After all, wouldn't you rather concentrate on the creative process?

Create Actions This is my nomination for Most Valuable and Underused Photoshop Web Production Tool. Actions record every operation you make and can be replayed on another object tomorrow, next month, or next year—delivering consistency and speed. I'll set up an Action for a very few steps if the effect is likely to be repeated. The time saved may seem insignificant, but even a day or two later, settings can be gone from your memory. Good site design requires meticulous attention to consistency: Actions can guarantee that photo effects or navigation elements will be constant.

Save Actions that are specific to one project with the archived files, and then remove them from your Actions window to prevent clutter. For a step-by-step tutorial on Actions, see *www.webreference.com/graphics/column18/5.html*.

Save masks Some effects don't follow the logical order that's required for recording Actions. But there's another way that you can store repeatable steps: save masks for your effects. If you have several effects for one project, or tend to use the same effect often, consider setting up a document to contain your masks.

Although this "template" document will cost you a little time to create, think of it as investing in a collection of your own special effects. (For a tutorial on Mask Basics, go to *www.webreference.com/graphics/column23*.)

Use Snapshots for repeat graphics To create several similar graphics with only minor variations, use the Snapshot feature to speed your work. A snapshot records your document at a given stage; you can recall it with one mouse click. First, create the "base" graphic. Then set any guidelines you think you'll need for repeated text or element placement, if necessary. In the History window, choose New Snapshot from the pop-up menu. Create the first variation on the graphic, and then use Save For Web, or Save A Copy, to save it. Click on the snapshot in the History window to return to the pre-variation state.

Change settings for Web work So that you don't have to think about proper Web color values, sizes, and so on at the last minute, it's a good idea to change your settings right off the bat.
- Work in pixels: choose File > Preferences > Units &

Rulers, and then choose Pixels from the Units pop-up menu.

- Show only RGB values in the Info window: Choose Palette Options from the pop-up menu in the Info window. Select your preferred color model for the first and second options in the Info window (RGB Color reports RGB values, while Web Color provides hex numbers).
- Limit your color palette to Web-safe colors: select the Only Web Colors option at the bottom of the Color Picker window.

Avoid color surprises Monitor profiling is not a good thing for Web production, since your work will be viewed with every possible combination of monitor quality and resolution. If you must use a monitor profile for other work, such as print production, you can preview how your Web work will appear on monitors that don't use profiling. Choose View > Preview > Uncompensated RGB. If you don't require a monitor profile, it's better to work without one. See *www.lynda.com/tips/ps_profiles.html* for the optimum color setup settings for Web design.

Maintain a visually accurate environment
When you're working on a rough composite for a site, you can change the Photoshop background color to match the color of the site background. Open your document and enlarge or maximize the window. Select the Paint Bucket tool. Hold down Shift and click in the gray area outside of your document. Your foreground color will flood the background. A fine outline marks the edge of your document, but it is much easier to determine the right look when the correct color surrounds your work.

Do fast previews You can toggle among three views using just one key. Press the F key to move from normal view to a view with only your menu showing (which reflects the background color of Photoshop's workspace), and again to move to full screen (which reflects a black background). Your tools and rulers remain visible in all views.

Check Mac or PC Gamma view You can see how your colors will appear on a different platform. Choose View > Preview > Windows RGB or View > Preview > Macintosh RGB. This view approximates gamma variations between platforms. There is no substitute for viewing your work on a different system, but this will help you optimize your Web colors for all viewers.

Turn off anti-aliasing with small text It will be much easier to read this way. Create text as usual, but select None as the anti-alias setting in the Type Tool dialog box. There are no hard rules about when to switch from aliased to anti-aliased text, but check your document preview as you specify text characteristics to decide what to do. Make sure you start your text entry from a 100-percent page view for an accurate preview.

Resize your canvas with the crop tool Use your crop tool to enlarge your canvas size: Maximize the view for your document and set the background color. Activate the crop tool and drag over the entire image to activate crop-boundary handles. Drag the handles outside of your document to the position you desire for the new canvas size. Refer to the Info window to set width and height dimensions, if necessary. Double-click inside the boundary or press Enter to set the new canvas size. Your document will grow to the crop tool boundaries, with the current background color filling the new area. Compared to resizing by specifying actual pixel amounts, the cropping method gives you the benefits of a live preview and the ability to act visually instead of numerically to get exactly the area you want.

Lock colors/Use Web Snap The Adaptive palette for GIF files offers the best compromise between achieving reasonable appearance on 256-color monitors and taking advantage of the extra capacity of higher-resolution monitors (just choose Adaptive in the Settings section of the Save For Web dialog box). You can also use the Save For Web command to exercise some control over important colors. If it matters that a particular color doesn't dither on low-resolution monitors, choose that color in the Save For Web dialog box. Click on the Web Snap button (the leftmost icon at the bottom of the Color Table tab). The color will change to the nearest Web-safe color (repeat to undo). You can also lock a color to prevent it from being dropped from the color palette. Choose the color and click on the Lock icon (repeat to unlock). This could be important for vital corporate colors, for example, but dithering may occur on low-resolution monitors.

Save a PSD Always—and I mean always, always, always—save a native Photoshop (.psd) version of your work with layers intact. You never know when you might have to go back to it.

Congratulations! You've learned 12 time-saving techniques to make your frequent tasks more consistent and efficient. While I can't promise these tips will help you deliver that site "yesterday," automating repetitive tasks does allow more time for creative development, and—dare I say it?—more profitable work. Now that's a smart investment. ◗

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