



# Some Background Notes on Flickr, PHP, and Phlickr

**P**HP is by far the most popular web scripting language. It's simple to learn, versatile, well documented, and readily available. Flickr is the world's most innovative photo-sharing site. This book is about combining the two to help you build more interesting websites, and to manage and to present your photos.

In the chapters that follow, you'll learn the basics of PHP, how to set up a web development environment, and how to use PHP to access and to present the photos you have stored on the Flickr site.

If you've never used PHP before, or if you still don't have a Flickr account, you won't be left in the dust. The first few chapters give you all the information you need to feel comfortable using Flickr, reading PHP code, and setting up a website on your home computer.

If you're already familiar with PHP, this book will serve as a good quick-start guide to using the PHP Phlickr library, which allows you to communicate with Flickr. This book will also have you working with the Flickr application program interface (API) in no time. You might want to jump ahead to Chapter 5 and have a look at some of the examples.

## What Is So Special About Flickr?

There are a lot of photo-sharing sites out on the web. If you've never used Flickr (<http://www.flickr.com>) or visited the site only once or twice, you might not see any great differences other than a slightly more confusing interface. Yet Flickr is often touted as a poster child of Web 2.0 technologies.

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**Note** *Web 2.0* is a very loosely defined term that is sometimes used to describe websites that employ the latest, novel techniques and practices. These sites generally emphasize collaboration, social networks, open programming interfaces, and machine-readable interfaces. But on a deeper level, Web 2.0 is meant to embody the zeitgeist of the Internet, as it were: the websites, people, and ideas that are most representative of what the web is about today. In much the same way that the world of the '80s was very different from that of the '60s, and Generation Xers are different from the Baby Boomers, the virtual world of today has a very different look, feel, and personality from the virtual world of the '90s. The concept of Web 2.0 expresses this sea change nicely.

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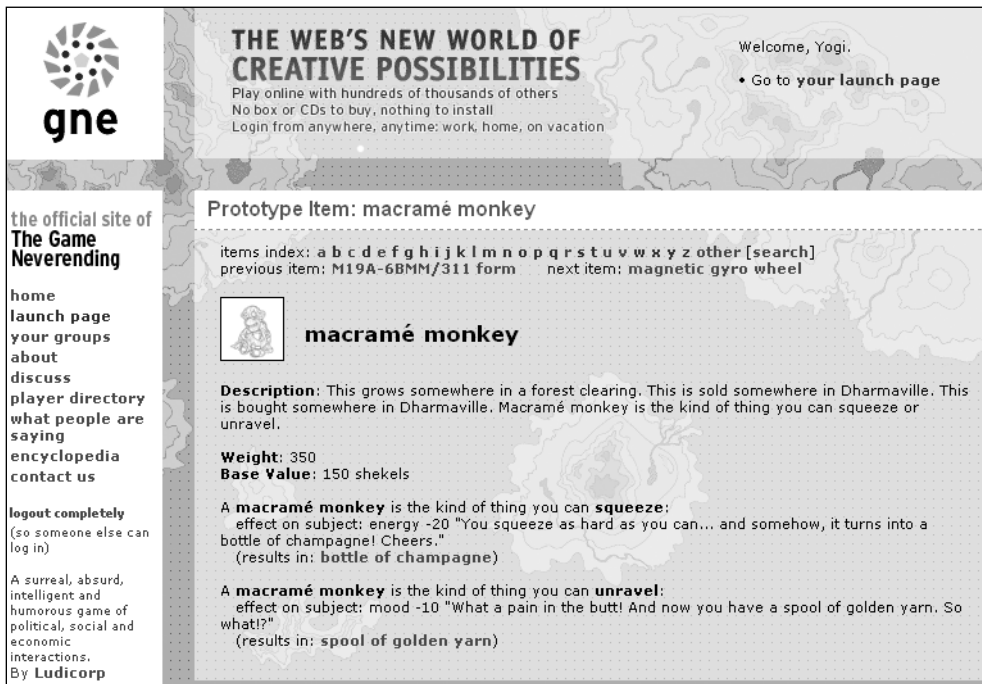
What makes Flickr different than other image-storage sites is the emphasis on openness, collaboration, social networking, and innovation. Features such as the open API; collaborative tagging; and cool, flashy interfaces set Flickr apart from the pack. These features also make Flickr much more useful from the standpoint of a programmer or blogger.

We'll take a detailed look at Flickr's features in the next chapter, but for now, let's look at some background on Flickr and PHP.

## The Game That Never Ends: A Short History of Flickr

One of the major appeals of the Flickr website is its playfulness. Perhaps this is because at heart, Flickr is a game.

Flickr has its roots in the massive, multiplayer, online game called Game Neverending, or GNE for short. GNE was a completely web-based game from Ludicorp (<http://www.ludicorp.com>) in which you could share game objects and interact with other users through an instant-messaging interface. So you could, for instance, swap a massage ticket or a glass of limeade with another player, or take some virtual slack. It wasn't a far stretch for the developers to realize that in addition to game objects, it would also be fun to share other digital objects, such as a PDF file, a Word document, or . . . a photo (Figure 1-1).



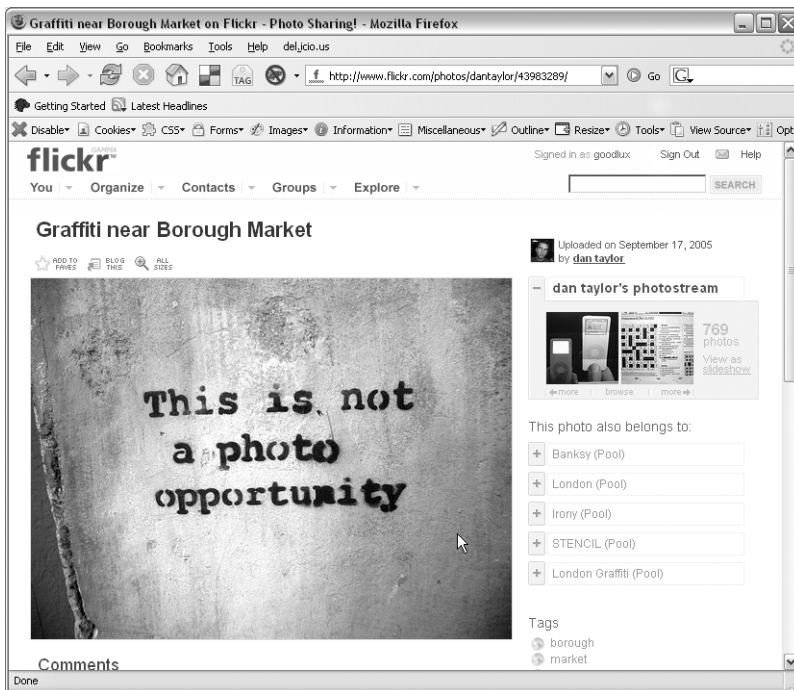
**Figure 1-1.** The macramé monkey was an object that could be shared in GNE.

The official Flickr site went live in February of 2004. In its earliest incarnation, Flickr was really just a stripped-down version of the GNE interface. You could upload photos and store

them in your personal “shoebox,” then drag the photos into a chat window to discuss them with others.

As the Flickr site grew, development turned towards a more asynchronous model, where comments would live on the site as HTML pages, rather than just fleeting conversation in a chat room. So a photo could build up a comment history over time. This worked well for bloggers, who needed a place where they could store their bulky 8-megapixel photos. The original chat functionality eventually became just one feature of the site, called Flickr Live, then was phased out.

Another feature that was added in after the initial launch was tagging (Figure 1-2). This extremely popular feature allows you to categorize photos with any words you choose. Taken on its own, this may not seem like a terribly interesting feature, but when you mix in the tags of thousands of other users in an open system like Flickr, a novel phenomenon emerges. Out of the combined chaos of individuals tagging photos with whatever words they please comes a sort of cultural classification system, sometimes called a *folksonomy*, where you can actually see what a word means to everyone using the system. This is great for exploring what a word or group of words means to our whole culture. It's especially telling to look up words with more nebulous meanings, such as *love*, *fear*, or *whoops*.



**Figure 1-2.** Photo tagged with irony. Creative Commons Licensed Photo by Dan Taylor. Graffiti by Unknown.

A year after Flickr's initial launch, rumors started circulating that Yahoo! was interested in acquiring Ludicorp. Sure enough, in March of 2005, Yahoo! bought Ludicorp. While initially this met with some resistance from the user base, Flickr had grown to the point where it was

frequently “having a massage” (down for servicing), and it’s now generally accepted that the union with Yahoo! added to the overall stability of the site.

Game Neverending was eventually put aside as the popularity of the photo-sharing component of the game grew. While GNE now appears to be permanently on the shelf, if you look closely at the address bar while moving through the Flickr site, you might catch a glimpse of the spirit of the game still alive and well, encoded in the URLs: `http://flickr.com/groups_admin.gne?id=14157979@N00`.

The name Flickr also has a colorful history. According to Flickr developer Eric Costello, the name Flickr was first thought up in the back of an ’86 Ford Econoline van by co-developer and philosopher Ben Cervey on a trip to the airport. The innovative *sans e*-style name was thought up by Caterina Fake when they found that Flickr.com was already taken. Conveniently, this opened up a whole world of names for third-party Flickr applications, such as Mappr, Uploadr, and Organizr.

## PHP Background

PHP (`http://www.php.net`) has its humble beginning as a set of scripts created by Rasmus Lerdorf in 1995 to manage a simple home page and online résumé. At that time, the acronym PHP stood for Personal Home Page.

By 1997, the code was completely rewritten by Andi Gutmans and Zeev Suraski, and the first official version was renamed PHP: Hypertext Preprocessor and released as PHP 3.

Further releases came in mid-1999 with PHP 4, which was based on the Zend engine, and more recently PHP 5 in 2004.

While the language has come a long way since the initial scripts created 11 years ago, in one sense it remains true to its roots: PHP is still a great language for putting together a simple website. You can easily write a bit of PHP code inside of HTML tags and have a page that changes every time you view it, or connect to a database to pull out stored information to display to users.

In the following chapters, we’ll show you how to pull random photos from Flickr, batch-edit tags and titles, display your photo sets on your own website, display information culled from Flickr groups, and much more. This book will give you all the tools you need to make use of the full Flickr API.

If you are considering whether or not to take the time to learn PHP, as opposed to another language, we highly recommend it. It’s an extremely accessible language that you can pick up quickly, yet it is full featured and scales well to handle extremely large, complicated tasks. How large? How complicated? To give you an idea of what is possible, you need to look no further than the Flickr site itself, which is written mainly in PHP.

As added pluses, PHP is well documented, has a massive user base, and is very accessible. If you already have a web hosting account, it’s very likely that you may already have it installed.

We will cover the basics of PHP so that you can interact with Flickr, but for a more comprehensive tutorial, we suggest you read *Beginning PHP and MySQL 5: From Novice to Professional* by W. Jason Gilmore (ISBN 1-59059-552-1; Apress, 2006). If you haven’t already, we also highly recommend that you take a look at the official PHP website at `http://www.php.net`. As mentioned before, the language is extremely well documented on the site, and the documentation is constantly updated.

## About Phlickr

Throughout this book we will be using the Phlickr PHP 5 libraries developed by co-author Andrew Morton. The Phlickr libraries act as a bridge between PHP and the Flickr API. Phlickr does the hard work of sending requests to the Flickr web server and making Flickr's responses available to PHP, and it generally makes the programming more fun. Instead of spending time writing your own PHP code to talk to the Flickr server directly, you can make use of well-designed and well-thought-out Phlickr objects to get right to your photos, sets, and groups.

Like PHP, the Phlickr libraries are also well documented. You can find the latest detailed information about all of the Phlickr objects at the Phlickr API reference: <http://www.drewish.com/projects/phlickr/docs/>.

## Summary

We've had a quick look through the history of Flickr and PHP in this chapter, in anticipation of the rest of the book. Now that you know a little bit about Flickr and PHP, we should get started. In the next chapter we'll take an in-depth look at Flickr's features. Then we'll cover the installation of PHP in Chapter 3 and the basics in Chapter 4.

