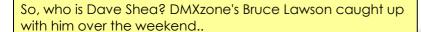# An interview with Dave Shea, CSS Zen gardener.

You might not recognize the name, but if you're a serious web professional, you'll know the site: **CSS Zen Garden**. It's a simple idea; provide the mark-up and allow people to submit various CSS designs to style the page. It immediately mirrored the zeitgeist, and has attracted some top graphic designers and inspired hundreds of web professionals to learn CSS. Why? now we can see what artists and graphic designers can do with CSS, rather than the early, rather boxy designs that the mark-up freaks were using. Thus, The ZenGarden is both gallery and manifesto. Dave writes, "There is clearly a need for CSS to be taken seriously by graphic artists. The Zen Garden aims to excite, inspire, and encourage participation."

So, who is Dave Shea? DMXzone's Bruce Lawson caught up with him over the weekend..

It's uncommon for CSS freaks to be designers. Why are you a 'CSS evangelist'?

Like Doug, Todd, Kris, and Paul, I recognize that CSS-based design is not inherently ugly. It's just that the right people don't understand it yet.
Look at the fundamental difference between creating a prepress file (or vector illustration or Quicktime movie or whatever) and creating CSS. Everything a designer does on a computer is GUI-driven; we need WYSIWYG to function. But CSS is code. It's a whole different world, and that's why it isn't catching on: you have to be half-geek to get it.

I've seen discussion recently about coding vs. design. Some argue that being intimately familiar with the underlying code is the only way to problem-solve when issues arise. I suppose this is a fair claim given today's state of support for CSS. But my view remains that, simply, it's the wrong methodology if traditional designers are expected to learn this stuff.

Somewhere along the way, we're going to have to start seeing visual CSS editors for that to change. Table-based tools exist; using a combination of Dreamweaver and Fireworks I can build a reasonably good-looking site without learning much HTML. The code won't be pretty, but it will work well enough to please most clients. Until we have CSS editors that can match these tools in functionality and ease of use, you'll always see resistance from designers who can't be bothered to learn the code. We need InDesign for CSS. Who's working on it?

But I'm not a designer like that. I'm discontent to wait for the tools to catch up, so I've taken a few giant steps ahead and looked into where the web is going. I see that with the pursuit of XML comes the complete and total separation of presentation and content. Locking myself in to late-90's design methods would be foolish with this on the horizon, and sooner or later unprofitable. I am planning for the future: my own.

Oh, and it's fun. There's not much that's more satisfying than running a new site through the validators for the first time and hitting XHTML, CSS, and 508 without a single change necessary.

Is there a difference in these post-boom days between a web designer and a web developer? Which are you?

Sort of. I consider a web designer predominantly front-end: they do design, Flash, XHTML/CSS coding, a bit of JavaScript, and maybe they'll dabble in server-side coding every now and then. I consider a web developer predominantly back-end: they do PHP, Perl, MySQL, ASP, XML, with the odd bit of JavaScript and XHTML/CSS/XSLT coding. There's overlap, and I see a sub-group thriving right dead in the center of these two that I have no name for. Throw in the Information Architects, Usability gurus, and Accessibility experts and the definitions get really hazy, really fast.

I am a web designer. I don't like that term, and usually bill myself out as a 'Graphic Designer' despite it, but my design focus happens to be the web.

What is about the Web a medium that fascinates/ drives you?

The order from chaos, the power of independent voices, and the equal footing that everyone is given, for starters. I take traditional media no more seriously than I take the average weblog these days. With sensationalistic journalism at all-time highs, I find myself placing as much (or more) trust in personalities as I do corporations. I can't be alone

But beyond that, there's the universality of it. I can access the same information as someone in Kyrgyzstan at the click of a mouse. I was taking frequent trips down the west coast of North America last year, and every time I looked out the window of the plane I couldn't help but visualize the vast distance the web encompasses. It's easy to take for granted, but it's truly incredible.

What's the first website you ever made? What's your favourite site you've ever worked on?

Well, the first that actually made it to a live server was a 'digital gallery' of some really bad 3D-rendered JPGs back in 1997. I was just coming down off a long QuickBasic programming kick and realizing that I was more interested in the graphics than I was in the actual programming, so I needed a medium. The web was brand new to my world at the time, and after picking up a copy of Molly Holzschlag's 'Sizzling Web Site Design I figured it was something new to play with. I even got a job from that one. 6 years later I'm still having fun with it, so I guess it was the right medium.

As far as favourite sites, I'm still getting a thrill out of every new design submitted to the Garden, and I love having absolutely no one to report to when working on mezzoblue.com. But for actual projects, I keep coming back every few years to a chocolate company called 'Over the Moon' here in Vancouver. I did their first site in 1999, and the current design was put together in late 2001/early 2002. Looking at the code you'll see that I was still in the table mindset back then. But it was the start of my dabbling with CSS/XHTML hybrid layouts, as you can see by the validator links in the footer. Why's it my favourite? Free chocolate.

Why start the css Zen Garden?

The idea that sparked the whole thing occurred to me about September of 2002. I was working for a company that still coded for Netscape 4.x, and I wanted to show them what was possible if they would just drop that albatross and look to the future. I started building it back then too, but it didn't develop any further than this[this is an exclusive for this interview, no one has seen this before].

March rolled around, and Lycos decided to run the "Hack Hotbot" contest which involved building a CSS 'skin' for the search engine. Long story short, I didn't like the conditions of the contest, their code was horrible, and my winning entry was rejected because I was Canadian.

But their incredibly inept mishandling of the contest turned out to be a good thing for the web design community in general. After I was done with my entries, I knew what NOT to do. With the idea from September still in the back of my head, it was time for me to put something together that got it *right*.

I saw a gulf. On one side, you have K10k and PixelSurgeon and DiK and their brethren; the high-end design-centric orgasmic eye-candy. On the other, there's the CSS freaks who were, as a collective, somewhat.. less.. than design-oriented.

Somebody had to bridge the gap. I don't think I've achieved that yet, but I see the resistance to CSS from the high-design community waning. People on the CSS side are actually starting to win in the CSS vs. tables war, and the Zen Garden is a huge arguing point in their favour.

Not that I'm advocating this battle or anything. Hybrid table-based layouts still have their place, and it's a matter of choosing the right technology for the job. Leave religion to the pros; make the best choice for your client.

It's now in the Google top 10 for 'css' searches; what accounts for its popularity?

I may be too familiar with CSS to answer this question properly. To me, the idea was a logical evolution of other projects, but to a lot of people it was a revolution. Some of us knew all along that CSS *could* do this, but very few had actually done it. Chris Casciano and Jeremy Keith were among the earliest.

But to everyone else, it was an eye-opener. A lot of people say they had no idea CSS was capable of doing what we're doing, so I guess the novelty factor worked in our favour. More, though, it's a centralized resource with an easy-to-remember name. It's something that people are eager to show others.

And with other designers submitting their own work, it's constantly being updated with new and surprising design work. No one is reading the text anymore, instead we keep checking back to see the amazing new interpretations of a now-familiar XHTML document.

Novelty was the spark, familiarity is what keeps it alive.

What's your personal favourite design up there?

The diplomatic answer, of course, is that they're all wonderful. But since you've got the Magnum against my temple, Bruce, I'd say that Didier Hilhorst's Release One, Radu Darvas' Zunflower, Doug Bowman's Golden Mean, and Mike Pick's What Lies Beneath went way past my expectations of what the Zen Garden could become. Each one offers something totally unique CSS-wise, but they're also Damn Good Design.

But those are the obvious choices. I am really fond of the set from design #24 (Dan Rubin's Not So Minimal) to design #31 (Kev Mears' Hedges) inclusive; each one of those is unique, well-designed, and an incredible addition to the project.

Just between you and me, Bruce, I never expected the quality of work that we've been seeing. Personally, it's been humbling, inspiring, and an honour to work with the various Garden submitters.

You also run mezzoblue. Why blue?

Blue is the expression of my quiet sorrow within.

Actually, I'm a pretty happy guy right now. I did some brainstorming in fall '01 to come up with a domain name that wasn't long taken, and I ran through a bunch of variants on a 'cold' theme – PixelBlue, MezzoFrost, and a few others. It felt right at the time, but I regret having locked myself into a specific palette. On the bright side, I got a really interesting colour scheme out of my latest re-design.

What's your favourite film/ piece of music/ building / pizza flavour/ foreign word?

At the moment: Amélie / Itzhak Perlman violin solos / Rockefeller Center / California Pizza Kitchen's Peking Duck / *merde*. List subject to change within seconds of publication.

Who do you think are the cutting-edge designers at the moment?

I was browsing through Doug Bowman's portfolio the other night, and I said to my wife, "you know, it's good to be intimidated by other people's work. It gives you something to shoot for." The work of Todd Dominey and the Cuban Council/K10k crew always make me smile. I wasn't familiar with Mike Pick until he submitted his two Zen Garden designs, but I've quickly become a fan of his portfolio.

I love browsing the design portals (surfstation.lu, pixelsurgeon.com, designiskinky.com) now and then for inspiration and some good, clean link-lovin'… but I can't commit myself to much more than the casual encounter. It's nothing personal, darlings, I just can't keep up with your shiny rocks and flashy cars.

The end of IE standalone, and the death of Netscape – a fillip or setback for adoption of modern mark-up techniques?

Depends on the day of the week. I go back and forth a lot.

The optimist in me says that Mozilla/Opera/Safari will quickly fill the giant hole left behind, the rise of alternative devices like wireless makes standards support more important than ever, and dealing with IE6 for the next six years will be a minor inconvenience at best.

The pessimist in me says that Microsoft never did like the web, and as they shift their focus away from it, we can bet whatever their strategy is from here on out will be proprietary. And given their incredible market share, we're just going to have to support it. The optimist in me interjects that there's no way in the world Microsoft can win that game; the public likes the web way too much to let them yank the carpet out beneath us.

The optimist wins out most days, but it's not a great situation.

On a scale of 1 (=Amish) to 10 (=Star Trek Convention attendee), how geeky are you?

My wife would claim a 12 for me, but I haven't seen Star Trek in years so it can't be all bad. It's a sliding scale at any rate, and compared to those who are liable to read this, I'm probably a 6. Compared to average Joe on the street? Definitely a 9.

Are Standards preventing people from publishing on the Web by placing barriers to entry (CSS, XHTML etc etc)?

An excellent question, and one that has started popping up in my personal e-mails from the Garden. My answer is no way, but I'm looking forward to the discussion that saying that will generate.

XHTML and CSS is a combination that no amateur should be forced to learn. 1996-era HTML was okay for them because a simple document consisted of a few presentational tags, and that was it - none of this abstract 'separation of presentation from content' nonsense. Most amateurs never get beyond the single-letter tags, and we shouldn't expect them to.

But as the web moves toward XML and the aforementioned abstraction, the barrier for entry is unquestionably raised. CSS is vital for the future, but picture your less-than-computer-literate family members trying to wrap their minds around inheritance and the box model. Yeah, right.

So if the web is for everyone, but the issues involved in creating for it require a stack of textbooks six feet high, then how does the average amateur publish their family photo album?

Services have been filling this gap for years. What we can't lose sight of is in publishing HTML, you first have to grasp FTP and directory structures. This in itself has been a significant barrier to entry, and most amateurs never bother. Web sites like Fotki and Kodak's Picture Playground offer a solution for photo storage. Now that weblogs are the Big Thing, all-in-one services like BlogSpot, TypePad, and AOL Journals will continue the trend.

Amateurs never need know we're changing the underlying code the web is built on. And while the technology doesn't matter to them, it sure is nice for me to see TypePad standards-compliant from the bottom up. Hopefully more services will follow suit.

You're a designer. I'm not. I wholeheartedly support the aims of www.bancomicsans.com in vanquishing the comic sans typeface from the earth. Do you?

Oh, absolutely. At first I thought it was just a pedantic in-joke for typography geeks, but then I started noticing the guy has a point. It's *everywhere*. I don't think it's fair to hold Vincent Connare (the designer of Comic Sans MS) responsible for the ubiquity, but I guess that's a lesson for designers everywhere: your work represents you, whether you want it to or not.

Assume you were tyrant of the world for a day. What else would you ban?

Vietnamese coffee and the big four: Nestle, Sara Lee, Proctor & Gamble, and Kraft.

Whoops, I'll get down off my soapbox.

What's next for you?

I'm still just riding the wave for now. Currently I'm putting the finishing touches on my contribution to the second edition of "Cascading Style Sheets: Separating Content from Presentation" for Apress. There may be one or two more publishing goodies in the not-too-distant future, but nothing's concrete yet.

Otherwise, I've only started mulling over my prospects. It's been a good year, but it never hurts to plan for the future. I'd like to begin working for a company in Vancouver that really understands what the web is all about, and do some amazing things. On that count, I'm open to suggestion from your readers.

What's the most beautiful thing you've seen today?

The smile of my newly-awoken bride.

The glass: half-full, or half-empty?

I'm gonna need a bigger glass.

Thanks Dave!

DMXzone.com has many tutorials on creating sites using CSS, whether CSS from scratch or converting old sites from tables to CSS.

CSS from scratch

CSS Design with Dreamweaver MX: Creating a Weblog Layout [link http://www.dmxzone.com/showDetail.asp?TypeId=28&NewsId=5355]

Styling forms with CSS [link http://www.dmxzone.com/showDetail.asp?TypeId=28&NewsId=5359]

JavaScript Tricks for Usable Forms [link http://www.dmxzone.com/showDetail.asp?TypeId=28&NewsId=5423]

Page layout with CSS - Layers and CSS Positioning

CSS Design with Dreamweaver MX: Type, Lists, Positioning and CSS Extensions

Page layout with CSS - Layers and CSS Positioning

CSS and Old Browsers

Converting tables to CSS

Tables to CSS

Tables to CSS: Taking CSS Further

Other Web Standards Tutorials

Accessibility FAQ (free) [link http://www.dmxzone.com/showDetail.asp?TypeId=28&NewsId=5430]

Forms and Accessibility [link http://www.dmxzone.com/showDetail.asp?TypeId=28&NewsId=5312]

HTML or XHTML: Which should I use?

Zen and the Art of DOCTYPE switching.

Setting Dreamweaver Preferences for Forward Compatibility

Better Living through Pleasantry: A Dreamweaver user's guide to effective technical communication

Other free "Movers and Shakers" interviews

Meet Jeffrey Zeldman

Meet Molly Holzschlag

Meet Eric Meyer

This list is correct as of day of publication (18 August 2003). Please check the dynamic list of all the latest CSS/XHTML/ Standards Tutorials.