

Interview with Eric Meyer

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by Bruce Lawson

Eric A. Meyer of www.meyerweb.com has been working with the Web since late 1993 and is an internationally recognized expert on the subjects of HTML and Cascading Style Sheets (CSS). He is currently employed as a Standards Evangelist with Netscape Communications while living in Cleveland, Ohio, which is a much nicer city than you've been led to believe. A graduate of and former Webmaster for Case Western Reserve University and an alumnus of the same fraternity chapter to which Donald Knuth once belonged, Eric coordinated the authoring and creation of the W3C's CSS Test Suite and has recently been acting as List Chaperone of the highly active `css-discuss` mailing list. Author of "[Eric Meyer on CSS](#)" (New Riders), "[Cascading Style Sheets: The Definitive Guide](#)" (O'Reilly & Associates), "[CSS2.0 Programmer's Reference](#)" (Osborne/McGraw-Hill), and the fairly well-known CSS Browser Compatibility Charts, Eric speaks at a variety of conferences on the subject of standards, CSS use, and Web design. He is also the host of "Your Father's Oldsmobile," a weekly Big Band-era radio show heard on WRUW 91.1-FM in Cleveland. When not otherwise busy, Eric is usually bothering his wife Kat in some fashion.

He was interviewed on July 12th 2003 by DMXzone's Bruce Lawson using questions contributed by the DMXzone community, and changed one answer in the light of today's news that [AOL canned Netscape](#).

Eric, can you tell us how you came to be Standards Evangelist at Netscape?
(Martha Beaverdam)

They asked me to join the standards evangelism team, and were willing to let me work remotely. That's pretty much the whole story. I came to their attention through my books, the CSS support charts, and my online forum participation, but from my perspective I just got mail out of the blue one day asking if I'd be interested in the job. It was hard to turn down a chance to get paid for what I was already doing in my spare time for nothing.

The news has just filtered through to the UK that Netscape has been canned. Can you tell me what you think about that decision; how do you **feel about that decision; where does that leave those who wish to continue with cross-browser development. And what the bloody hell are AOL up to?**

(Bruce)

I feel terrible. Netscape really kicked off the revolution, and with its death coming so soon after the death of IE/Mac and IE/Win, it feels like all the lights are going out. They had really gotten behind the standards message, too, funding an entire team dedicated to standards evangelism. That team is now gone, and I feel like we've really lost something.

I also feel a little foolish about my hope that Netscape had a future. It didn't seem likely after AOL's settlement with Microsoft, but there was still that hope that AOL would look to the future and envision a world where they could improve user experience with a cross-platform Web engine they'd had a hand in developing. Maybe that will still happen under a name other than Netscape, he said with faint hope. Regardless, what this means to those who wish to continue with cross-browser development is that things are just the same as they were last week. There are still a whole bunch of browsers out there, and Mozilla isn't going away any time soon, now that the Mozilla Foundation has been established. If you want to reach the widest possible audience in the most efficient way, standards are still as important as ever. Maybe more so. Developers who decide they can now develop for IE only will be in for a rude shock.

What's AOL up to? I can't figure out why, but the board of directors isn't consulting with me on the future direction of AOL. So I don't have any insights to share on that score, I'm sorry to say.

Is it true you are related to Luke Skywalker?

(Paul Martin) (editor's note: an entry on a [newsgroup](#) prompted this question..)

I sincerely hope not, because if we are related, it means I have to kiss him. Twice.

How come you're not in the Web Standards Project?

(Sophie Viktor)

I actually was, back in the day. Shortly after the WSP was formed in 1998, I was invited to be a founding member of the CSS Action Group (otherwise known as the Seven CSS Samurai), and helped write things like "The Top Ten CSS Problems in IE" document.

We were actually a very productive group. We produced some tests, wrote honest assessments of browser CSS implementations, created complex testcases, and so on. We also weighed in pretty heavily on the WSP's statement regarding Microsoft's patent on style sheets, getting them to soften a lot of the language and take a more wait-and-see approach.

Then the group fell largely silent, as did the WSP itself. When the WSP was reconstituted, nobody asked me to join in. By then I was working for Netscape, and I expect the feeling was that employees of browser makers shouldn't be members of the WSP. If so, I fully agree with that feeling. The WSP should be a grassroots organization, the better to represent the folks in the trenches.

I would like to know if there is anything EFFECTIVE that can be done to convince Microsoft to add FULL PNG support to IE? I know that there are petitions out there, but that does not seem to be getting any play in Redmond. Is there a way to force Microsoft to say one way or another whether or not they will get in-line with web-standards, or are we to just shut up and wait to see what they produce in the future?

(Jonathan K. Green)

I would like to know, too. There are only two things I can think up. The first is major customers (as in large corporations) can tell MS that full PNG support is necessary in Explorer. The second is designers can just start using PNGs *en masse* and let the design look somewhat degraded in Explorer in the hopes of shaming MS into adding alpha-channel support. I'm not saying this is a great idea, mind you, nor that I think shame will have much effect in this case.

I'd also like to point out the Explorer for Macintosh has had complete native PNG support since it was released in mid-2000. A lot of people think you have to have QuickTime installed to get the PNG support, but that's untrue; I once uninstalled QuickTime from my Mac and PNGs were still rendered correctly in IE. It may have been the first commercial browser released with full PNG support, but I don't remember now if someone else beat them to it or not.

I don't really think there's any hope of "forcing" Microsoft to do anything, though. So long as 90%+ of the desktop market uses Windows, and 90%+ use Explorer to browser the Web, Microsoft will take the somewhat understandable view that they can do whatever they like, and we should be thankful for it. Now that development of Internet Explorer has come to an end, there aren't too many alternatives to simply waiting to see what Microsoft will release in the future and reacting to it then. Hopefully whatever they do after IE will continue down the standards path.

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

(Bruce)

That anyone can participate as a producer, not just a consumer. Anyone can publish something on the Web for very little cost. That means that an expert in something, no

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matter how obscure, can provide great information on that area of expertise for the other people in the world who want that information. Those people can then add their knowledge to what they learned, and provide improved information. I know some people will say it's still mostly junk, but that's true of anything. The Web is a medium that can be self-correcting at a very rapid pace, a medium that continually evolves. I'm fascinated just by the idea of being able to watch how it will evolve, and being able to explore the linking structures that form within the medium.

What do you mean, self-correcting? Do you mean things like Google that rank the dross low and perpetuate the much-viewed status of popular sites? Do you have any hope that the semantic web will come along soon?

(Bruce)

I mean the way that bad or unwanted information sinks to the bottom, and good or wanted information rises to prominence. That happens through the simple mechanics of linking: the more a site is linked, the better (in the eyes of the population) that site is ranked. Google gives us a central place to get that information, but before Google or any other search engine, the same process was underway. We all knew about the Internet Coffee Machine and the Amazing Netscape Fish Cam because everyone linked to them.

Thus the Web can be self-correcting. True, everyone will link to the latest silly Flash movie, but they'll keep links hanging around for useful information. So the best movie-review site, where "best" means "most in tune with what most people want in a movie review site," will get the links and therefore rise to the top. Call it "mobmod," if you like; it's like [Slashdot](#) modding, except done in a fashion far more anarchic than [Slashdot's](#) (if you can picture that).

Personally, I have very little hope for the Semantic Web as it's been described. The only way such a system will work is if every resource describes itself honestly, and as Cory Doctrow [pointed out](#), there's too much incentive for people to lie about what they provide. What may happen instead is that semantic networks will arise from within the structure we already have. Blogrolls are actually an interesting example of this: they're a "People who read this site might also like..." recommendation. I'd like to see even more structure to those links, and some peers and I have worked on a way to provide that structure.

I suspect that if we ever do get a semantic Web, it will be evolved: sites will all try different approaches, and as they come together, ideas and techniques will combine and mutate, with the worst ideas being discarded and the best flourishing and spread throughout semantic sites. That makes sense to me. It's far more efficient in the long run than trying to impose some kind of order from on high.

Eric, from "CSS For Anarchists" to Dave Shea's "CSS Zen Garden" it appears that CSS has gone from a hardly-adopted 'rebel' technology to the technology that has defined a path to enlightenment. Is CSS becoming more of a religion or a

political following rather than a technology? Will we see little CSS Buddha statues in computer stores?

(Nick Finck)

I sincerely hope it isn't becoming a religion, but with people tossing titles like "High Priest of CSS" and "CSS Pope" in my general direction, I fret that maybe it is, a little bit. Of course, I picked the title of "Standards Evangelist" for my current job, so I should talk. It's probably true that many CSS advocates, myself among them, got a little messianic at times about using CSS and dumping tables. The whole "tables are evil/CSS is crap" argument is silly, and yet understandable: the drive to promote something new often leads to hyperbole.

"The whole 'tables are evil/CSS is crap' argument is silly"

I sincerely hope that whatever pseudo-religious undercurrents have formed will calmly dissipate. The thing about CSS is that it's a tool. It's a very powerful tool, one that has the potential to become even more powerful and therefore useful, but it's still a tool. People should of course always use the best tool for a job, whatever it might be, and the expert ought to help others use the tool better. But no matter how skilled you are with a tool, you shouldn't use it to hit other people.

On a scale of 1 to 10 (1=Amish, 10=slashdot), how geeky are you?

(Bruce)

8.53973.

When can we expect the second edition of "Cascading Style Sheets: The Definitive Guide"?

(Paul Martin)

It's difficult to be certain. We were aiming for publication by the end of 2003 but it may be early 2004 instead. The book is about 70% written, but since it covers both CSS2 and CSS2.1, to an extent its completion depends on the completion of CSS2.1. If CSS2.1 remains unfinished for too long we may at some point just decide to publish anyway, and hope nothing major changes.

There's a feeling out there that "you can spot a CSS site a mile off", meaning (I guess) that CSS sites are limited in range. Do you agree?

[Nong Jan]

Until recently, I would have, yes. This is not surprising, because most CSS early-adopters were people like me. I know CSS really well, and can write HTML by hand... but I'm no graphic designer, and I know it. Take my advice about CSS, but don't ask me how to make your site look better. If I

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knew that, I'd already have done it for my site. Any more, though, you really can't spot a CSS site a mile off, assuming the designer knows what he or she is doing. Well, that and a vaguely current browser. The [CSS Zen Garden](#) is the best current example of this.

look better.”

For a while, a lot of people were borrowing CSS design ideas outright, like the example layouts at [glish.com](#) and [bluerobot.com](#), [Zeldman's](#) designs, and even stuff that I'd done. In a learning phase, this is to be expected. Back in the mid-90's, there was a period where every commercial Web site looked pretty much the same, because everyone was doing whatever [Dave Seigel](#) was doing. As people learned how to do their own thing, they did, and sites began to acquire distinctive styles. The same is now happening in the CSS arena. A lot of people are moving beyond those first steps and doing compelling Web design work that just happens to be driven by CSS. As the tool has become better understood, artists are using it to expand the range of what we think is possible.

There's one other reason that CSS-driven sites all tended to look the same. Because CSS1 is great for styling text, it was used on sites that were centered around text, not images. The boxes-of-text and dotted-line stereotype of CSS sites springs from the fact that most such sites were trying to style the same kinds of information. That's less and less the case, since CSS2 support allows for a lot more than just text styling.

Are you, or have you ever been, a techno-fascist?

(Bruce McCarthy)

(editor's note: Eric was accused of being such in an amazon review)

Yes, I think it was right around the time you stopped beating your wife.

Hey, who told you about me beating my wife?

A friend of mine downloaded the videos.

Do you feel that CSS will be with us for the long-term or that it will eventually be replaced (just as presentational mark-up has been replaced) with something more advanced? If so, should web designers with the intent of building forward-compatible sites be at all concerned?

(Michael Cacciottolo)

Eventually it will be replaced by something, the same way Gopher was replaced by the Web and, as you say, HTML-based design is being replaced by CSS-driven design. We just have no idea what that might be, so CSS appears likely to stick around for a while yet.

What does this mean? It means authors who build forward compatible sites will be ahead of the game. They'll be much better able to

“Authors who build forward compatible sites will be

transition to whatever comes next if their sites are truly forward compatible. It's the authors that don't take this step who need to be concerned.

ahead of the game."

You're a renowned CSS teacher, name-checked by many. Who do *you* name-check as great teachers/ influences?

(Bruce)

The greatest teaching influence I've had was my mother, who passed away in April. She was a teacher almost my entire life, mostly at the grade school level and as what was then called an "LD" (learning disabilities) teacher. Through her I saw what it meant to be a teacher, both good and bad, and what incredible good a teacher can do. And of course she taught me a great deal about life as well. I'll always be grateful she lived long enough to see me become a teacher in my own way.

On a more general intellectual level, again Mom, but also Carl Sagan and James Burke. Both are great examples of an expert making his field of study accessible to anyone with an interest to learn, presenting deep and fascinating concepts in engaging ways. I try to emulate them as much as possible in my writing, knowing that I may never reach their level but hoping to come close on occasion.

What's your favourite piece of music/ building/ movie/ pizza flavour/ Batman super-villain?

(Bruce)

Whatever I'm listening to in iTunes/ my house/ *Arsenic and Old Lace*/ *Death By Meat*/ Akiva Goldsman.

I read <http://www.meyerweb.com/eric/thoughts/2003b.html#t20030528>. Do you think you have lost touch with what people want to know about CSS, especially CSS newbies?

(Russ Weakley)

I'm still grappling with this question, to be honest. Part of me thinks I have, but that it's okay because I helped chart the CSS terrain, and now that younger blood is moving in to explore all the nooks and crannies, it's time for me to take a rest and not worry about what interests people. Another part thinks I'm still enough in touch to keep doing what I do, and that's all I could ask. A third part thinks I should stop fretting and get back to work. I try to listen to the third part.

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

(Bruce)

No, I think they lower the barriers to publishing, period. Imagine if the only way you could get your ideas to the rest of the world was by paying to have it printed and distributed. That gets expensive. Now imagine the Web if you had to create a different site for every browser, and I mean had absolutely no alternative than to have an IE site, a Netscape site, an Opera site, a Safari site, a Mozilla site, a Konqueror site, an iCab site, a Lynx site, a Hiptop site... and so on. That would be incredibly time-consuming—in other words, expensive.

Instead, we have a core set of standards that should be cross-platform and cross-browser. They aren't, exactly, but they're close in a lot of ways. And I don't accept the argument that we can dismiss all these problems by doing everything in Flash, because then the barrier to entry is not only the cost of the Flash authoring tools, but learning how to use the tool. I don't imagine that the effort invested in becoming expert in Flash authoring is all that different from the effort that goes into becoming a Web design professional. So I'd say standards actually encourage people to publish on the Web, whether or not they realize it.

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Who, in your opinion, are the most exciting, cutting-edge, web professionals at work today?

(Matt Mills)

[Dave Shea](#), [Doug Bowman](#), and [Jeremy Keith](#) are the three names that come immediately to mind. They're all three showing us how lean, validating mark-up and CSS can deliver great visual design using half (or less) the bytes of old-school HTML-driven layout, and yield highly accessible and multi-medium documents in the process. They're also making it abundantly clear that CSS-driven design doesn't all have to look the same.

What would you like to be doing in 5 years time?

(Bruce)

Reading to my children. Kat and I don't actually have any children just yet, but I'm pretty sure at least one will come along in the next five years. Professionally, I'd like to be doing the same kinds of things I'm doing now: figuring out ways to improve the overall Web ecology, working to keep information as accessible and interoperable as possible, and teaching those who can learn from what I know. Maybe that will still be related to CSS, and maybe it won't. I'll just have to see where the Web's evolution takes me.

The glass: Half full, or half-empty?

(Bruce)

Both. It's impossible to have one of those states without the other. I'm far more interested by what's in the glass, and how it distorts and affects the light coming through it.

Thanks Eric!

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

[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

[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 Movers and Shakers interviews

[Meet Jeffrey Zeldman](#)

[Meet Molly Holzschlag](#)

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