

## **Interview with Jeffrey Zeldman**

### **By Bruce Lawson**

Bruce Lawson of DMXzone.com interviews Jeffrey Zeldman, in which Zeldman talks of the **human** side of Web Standards, how the Web Standards Project got to advise Macromedia on the development of Dreamweaver MX, and the perils of being a George Clooney look-alike Web Designer.

*Jeffrey Zeldman was a co-founder of [The Web Standards Project](#), publishes [A List Apart](#) - a magazine "For People Who Make Websites", runs the New York web design firm [Happy Cog](#), and lectures widely on Web Standards. Zeldman's new book "Designing With Web Standards" was published by New Riders in May 2003 and is one of the Amazon.com bestsellers. ([DMXzone book review](#))*

### **What's the history? How did you get to be a Standards Samurai?**

I discovered web standards accidentally and stayed with them because they provided a better tool set and a way out of the browser mess.

Like everyone else, I initially saw the web as a visual medium whose layout was controlled by browser-specific, extended HTML. I loved my font tags as much as the next designer. I didn't know about CSS until Microsoft unveiled IE3, which partially supported that specification. Suddenly I saw it was possible to achieve better designs with less bandwidth. But CSS in IE3 didn't work the same way between platforms, and CSS didn't work at all in Netscape 3. And Netscape's JavaScript didn't work in IE.

When the 4.0 browsers came out, and were even more incompatible with each other, let alone with previous versions of the manufacturers' own browsers, many of us had had enough. A few of us got together to do something about it, and The Web Standards Project (WaSP) was born.

Let me emphasize that many of us didn't know or care until much later about the deeper implications and benefits of the W3C's vision for the web. We were interested in enhancing our ability to design and in simplifying our jobs. We weren't concerned with theory but with practical techniques to improve user experience and reach more people on more browsers, platforms, and devices, with less monkey work. It was that simple then and it is still that simple.

**"We were only interested in enhancing our ability to design and in simplifying our jobs"**

## **How did it happen that browser and WYSIWG manufacturers stopped looking at you like you were madmen shouting at passers-by in the street, and actually seek out the WaSP's help/ advice?**

For one thing, we stopped yelling. Once we'd succeeded in getting Microsoft and Netscape's attention, we became more like consultants than combatants.

Todd Farner led a CSS Samurai effort beginning in 1998. The group's job was to identify the Top 10 CSS Problems in leading browsers - showing where the browser failed, explaining how it should behave, and briefly sharing why the correct behavior was important to web users, developers, and, for that matter, to the company that made the browser. It was like doing a usability study and offering it to the client free of charge. It bred goodwill between WaSP and browser engineers while providing them with a useful roadmap toward compliance.

Another thing is, although hundreds of millions **use** the web, it's a small industry. A few of us were friendly with a few of the engineers who develop leading browsers. Well, friends talk. Some of these engineers privately agreed with WaSP's assessment of the importance of correct, complete support for common standards. So even if the head of marketing wouldn't talk to us, the people who mattered did - and they often went ahead and covertly did the right thing, improving their browsers' compliance whether Marketing told them to or not.

## **Why is it that Marketing departments seem actively to boast of their standards compliance now?**

The same reason car makers tell you about air bags or other product attributes: because they're perceived, correctly, as desirable features that provide genuine benefits. The browser companies don't necessarily tell you why they've added support for these standards - they figure people who care about them already understand the benefits.

Then too, they've done a lot of work and they're justifiably proud of having done it. By doing that work, they've not only addressed the needs of a core section of their audience (designers and developers), they've also helped the wider public they serve, by enabling designers and developers to do a better job of creating impactful, usable, accessible experiences.

***"One browser company may also talk about its standards compliance to offset perceptions that it is an anti-competitive giant that makes its own rules."***

One company may also talk about its standards compliance to offset perceptions that it is an anti-competitive giant that makes its own rules. Another, less successful company will tell you that it supports standards to show that it can compete with the dominant player; and if its standards compliance exceeds that of the more successful company, saying so gives the browser maker a slight competitive edge, at least among developers and geeks.

**What changed? What was the moment that WaSP realised that you were winning the PR battle? How did it *feel*?**

There were always signs. In 1998 or early '99, when Netscape announced that it would scrap its legacy browser in favor of one built upon the standards-compliant Gecko rendering engine, which is what we had strongly suggested they do, some of us started thinking, "We're making a difference, this might actually work."

There was a bigger sense of that in 2000, when the world got its first generation of browsers that could be said to useably support CSS, (X)HTML, ECMAScript, and the DOM. The version of Opera released in 2000 still had some DOM compliance issues, but essentially all leading browsers supported the core standards WaSP had been promoting since its inception.

I can't speak for other members of The WaSP, but as one standards-supporting browser after another was released in that year, I felt a profound sense of happiness and a stronger and stronger feeling of hope. The timing was odd: the global economy was constricting, IT was down the tubes, web agencies were closing or shrinking, but in the midst of the bleakness there was this hopefulness about the medium - that it might actually move forward in a balanced, rational way.

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The next phase, as I've mentioned, was getting other designers and developers on board. Soon after A List Apart converted to CSS layout in February 2001, a whole bevy of indie sites did likewise, and people like Eric Costello and Owen Briggs began publishing free CSS templates anyone could use and adapt. That was exciting: you could see the change working. And then came the public sector sites and finally the big corporate sites. So I'd say, in the first few years of WaSP, we had glimmers of hope but most often felt like Don Quixote. But as the 20th century expired and the new millennium began, over and over again we got proof that people were "getting it," that the desired change was manifesting.

**The WaSP reformed last year because "tens of thousands of professional designers and developers continue to use outdated methods that yoke structure to presentation". Why are the web professionals the last ones to get standards?**

They are not the last to "get" standards. Without the support of thousands of designers and developers who signed early WaSP petitions, the browser companies would have been far less likely to change so much so quickly. When the WaSP said it spoke for thousands of developers, that statement was not hype, it was fact.

But many others in the web professional community couldn't really be expected to "get" standards until browsers actually supported them. So browser makers were the first audience we needed to convince. We did that - and the browsers changed. We then began deepening our outreach and educational efforts, sometimes by publishing tutorials and such, and other times by more radical means.

**"Did the campaign really persuade uncle Ralph to drop Netscape 4 like a hot rock? Probably not, and realistically, we never expected it to."**

The campaign empowered many designers and developers to start using these technologies. The response came in waves: first independent sites did it, then public sector sites came aboard, and finally big commercial sites like Wired.com and ESPN.net redesigned with standards. Did the campaign really persuade uncle Ralph to drop Netscape 4 like a hot rock? Probably not, and realistically, we never expected it to. Did it coax entrenched corporate and public sector IT heads into upgrading their organization's browser? Possibly, in a few cases, it might have done that. Mainly, it was a designer-developer outreach program, and on that level it worked.

So when the WaSP re-formed "to focus on developer education," it had actually already been doing that. Now it will simply do it in gentler ways - because, now that the climate has changed, it **can** do it in gentler ways.

During the reformation, the group also began working with leading tool-makers. Because if Dreamweaver didn't generate standards-compliant mark-up, styles, and code, even those professionals who "got" it might not have time to bother with it. The WaSP's Dreamweaver Task Force, led by Rachel Andrew and Drew McLellan, helped Macromedia enhance standards compliance in the leading visual web editor. Macromedia was receptive because they're smart, and because they were hearing about standards from their user groups. Which again suggests that many web professionals already do "get" it.

**Did you guys ask Macromedia if you could work with them on Dreamweaver MX, or did they contact WaSP?**

WaSP put the idea to Macromedia, but Macromedia already had a relationship with [Rachel \[Andrew, a DMXzone premium content author\]](#) and Drew, who are respected members of the Dreamweaver community, and it also had a relationship with Jeffrey Veen, who is one of the co-founders of The WaSP. So when we first talked to Macromedia in their San Francisco headquarters, it was a very friendly meeting.

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And I have to say, the engineers were already very interested in standards and were already beginning to implement them far more rigorously in what would eventually become Dreamweaver MX. So we weren't hard-selling them on something they didn't want; we were offering to help them achieve something they themselves knew was important to their users.

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

Does English prevent people from communicating? It has grammar and syntax and those are hard. Yet even with a rudimentary knowledge of English, if I yell, "Help! Fire!", you'll understand.

Standards are a continuum of interlocking, empowering technologies. The more you know, the more you can do. But you can do a lot even if you don't know all that much, yet.

If you'd never used JavaScript and were suddenly asked to build a full-fledged DOM-based web application, you'd have a tough time. What happens with, for instance, CSS, is that people who've never used it, or who've barely used it, or who've only used a little of it without understanding it, sometimes try to do a full-blown CSS layout, and those CSS newbies naturally become frustrated.

Well, the trick to learning anything is to approach the problem in stages. If you've always done table layouts and you've never used CSS, stick with table layouts for now, but replace your font tags with style sheets. As you learn more, you'll do more. It's a continuum, not a set of inflexible rules. The second half of *Designing With Web Standards* goes through the tools and shows how they work together, and in the book we create a hybrid site using tables plus CSS before tackling a CSS-only layout. We do that to remove fear from the equation and to ease the learning curve by letting you work with what you already know.

***"Dreamweaver lets an inexperienced person build a site but it does more in the hands of an experienced professional. And that's the nature of web development: it's a great profession for people who like to learn."***

Anyone can learn these technologies - you already know HTML; XHTML is essentially the same thing with a few additional rules. Also, the tools keep improving. If you're a content person, not a coder, or if you're a designer who's unfamiliar with the underlying mark-up, there are applications like Dreamweaver and publishing tools like Six Apart's upcoming TypePad that can help you generate compliant sites. Naturally, the more you know, the better these tools work and the more power they give you. Dreamweaver lets an inexperienced person build a site but it does more in the hands of an experienced professional. And that's the nature of web development: it's a great profession for people who like to learn.

**What's your favourite building, film, piece of music, type of pizza?**

Rockefeller Center, *North by Northwest*, Music for Films, black olives and fresh garlic.

**DMXzone is based in Holland, and Orange is the Dutch national color! What's the deal with orange?** *(Editor's note: Zeldman's web design shop and book are all orange and, until recently, so was his personal site)*

Don't forget, the original 1998 WaSP site was also orange (<http://archive.webstandards.org/index0901.html>). That orange came from my city-boy sense of a wasp's coloration. It was a brand thing - WaSP was an easy mnemonic and the site was designed to stick that little bug in your head.

I liked that color area so much I started working it into my personal site. When I launched my web agency (<http://www.happykog.com/>) it was originally purple, but over time it too migrated to the land of happy citrus flavor.

The personal site ([www.zeldman.com](http://www.zeldman.com)) is no longer orange, at least not in the default user style sheet view. It's a bleached-back pale peach: the ghost of orange past. However, the ancient Home button at the bottom of every page of the site retains a flat orange background, and that Home button is pretty well known as a brand. So when we decided to do an author-driven book cover, we went with that established orange brand image.

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

This will sound like bollocks, but it truly is an undiscovered country. We are constantly learning new things and formulating rules based on what we've learned ... only to learn a bit later that our understanding and its resulting rules was an oversimplification.

The Web is democratic. Anyone can publish on it, and can potentially reach an audience. The financial barriers are much higher in other media, and in many of those media there are also huge technological barriers. You may have a great movie idea, but your chances of seeing that vision fulfilled are almost nil. Even Spike Lee and Martin Scorsese have to fight to get their movies made the way they want them. But nobody can stop you from creating a website, and nobody can make you design it a certain way, or restrict the kind of content you wish to publish.

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**You're very relaxed about telling people about \*you\* on your web site, and you used to be a musician (which I've always felt to be one of the most personal of art forms). Is this why you're the acceptable face of techie/ w3c hieroglyphics to so many web designers - the fact that they see you as open, human and predominantly artistic?**

I'd approach your question this way instead. There are people who create web technologies. They speak in ways that make sense to their fellow geeks but are not particularly accessible to designers. Nor are they necessarily motivated by the things designers care about. Then there are people who write about design and technology but don't necessarily practice design or use technology, except as it relates to what they're writing.

I'm a designer. I'm also able to articulate ideas. This is helpful when presenting work to clients, but it's also useful in sharing knowledge with other members of the design community. In the case of WaSP and ALA and this new book, the knowledge I was sharing was about web standards. Not deep technical stuff or theoretical stuff - that's the province of the geeks who create these technologies - and not what you'd get from a professional writer who dabbled a little in design or technology. I have the concerns of a designer, I've seen how standards solve design problems, and I write about that. Does that make sense? (ed: yes! Thanks.)

### Flash: weapon of evil, or bringer of light?

**"Web standards are not a religion, they're tools that offer a spectrum of choices and approaches."**

Powerful tool, especially when used by artists who understand the scripting aspects. Some standards folks have a theological problem with Flash. But web standards are not a religion, they're tools that offer a spectrum of choices and approaches. Flash does certain things that XML plus CSS plus the DOM can't do, just as QuickTime does things other Internet technologies can't do. Religiously anti-Flash geeks who can look at the work of The Chopping Block (<http://choppingblock.com/>) or one9ine (<http://one9ine.com/>), for instance, and see nothing of value in it, are either aesthetically impaired or in denial.

Other people bust on Flash because of accessibility concerns, and those are as important to me as I know they are to you. Macromedia has addressed many of them in the MX release and is working on the few it hasn't licked. From an accessibility point of view, the challenge with Flash is, how can you deliver the same information **and a comparable experience** to those who cannot view SWF-formatted content? The information part is do-able if you understand Flash MX. The comparable experience part is another story, and in some cases it may not be possible, in the same way that you can't deliver a movie experience through a newspaper.

From a standards point of view, the main problem with Flash or any other embedded technology is, how can you embed it in a way that works and also validates? And the answer is, you mainly can't.

Drew McLellan showed that you could embed Flash using only the standard XHTML object element and valid, W3C-approved attributes (<http://www.alistapart.com/stories/flashesatay/>). That's the way Flash ought to be inserted in web pages, and it works for most users in most browsers. But it's unpredictable: it fails for some IE/Windows users; it also fails for some Mozilla users. Now, the object tag dates back to the mid-1990s, and every browser should support it reliably ... but they don't necessarily do that.

No developer who goes to the trouble of creating a Flash-based user experience wants to see it fail merely to prove a point about browser standards compliance or lack thereof. So for the foreseeable future, many Flash artists - even those who care about web standards - will likely use the proprietary, non-compliant "publishing" code that Flash generates by default. Which is kind of a shame. You run into the same problems embedding any rich media object, not just Flash.

***"Many Flash artists - even those who care about web standards - will likely use the proprietary, non-compliant "publishing" code that Flash generates by default."***

**Does the fact that a cunning workaround/ hack is needed to allow a massively popular technology like Flash to be embedded and validate, indicate that the W3C is out-of-step with what people want to do? (I'm also thinking here of the panic over XHTML 2 recently.)**

I wouldn't go that far. The W3C comes at these things from a scientific point of view: how should the web be built? By what premises could we create a unified, logical architecture for this powerful medium? Designers and developers come at it a completely different way, based on their day-to-day tasks: how can I make this work? I'm on a deadline and I need to solve this problem today.

There is a tension between those two approaches, but useful synthesis often results from such tensions - as long as the non-scientists have a voice in what the W3C creates. That's why the W3C publishes its ideas as working drafts, solicits community feedback, and changes what it has created in response to that feedback. For instance, the new draft of XHTML 2 clearly shows that the W3C is listening to the community's feedback. Not as keenly as Macromedia or Adobe might listen to its users, perhaps, but it is listening.

***"The W3C's failure to make that simple compromise with a widely accepted practice might lead some to dismiss the organization and its works, but that would be a tragic mistake."***

In my book I get into my theory about why the W3C never included the EMBED element in any HTML or XHTML specification, even though skillions of professionals used that tag on millions of websites. I wish they had overcome whatever theoretical problems they had with the **EMBED** tag and simply gone ahead and put into the specs, in the same way they allowed, say **bgcolor** in the HTML and XHTML Transitional specs.

The W3C's failure to make that simple compromise with a widely accepted practice might lead some to dismiss the organization and its works, but that would be a tragic mistake.

**On a scale of 1 to 10 (1=Amish, 10=Star trek convention attendee), how geeky are you?**

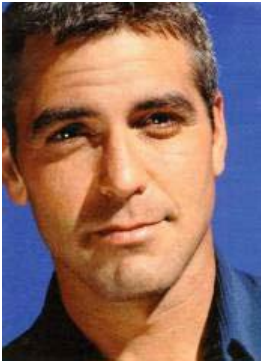
Six and a half. I don't own a Palm Pilot, I prefer the Mac GUI to a command line interface, I'm not a programmer or a backend developer, I don't own a Tivo and yet my life seems rich and full, I prefer paper tickets to e-tickets, and I can still use a pen if I have to.

On the flip side, I hand-roll my XHTML, CSS, RSS, and JavaScript in a text editor, I helped Craig Hockenberry of Iconfactory.com develop the first plug-ins to handle web color back before Photoshop even thought about web publishing, my email filters are more complex than the code in some applications, I've been designing websites since 1995, and I can listen to Tim Bray without subtitles.

So maybe I'm a seven.

**Do people ask for your autograph?**

Yes. But some of them may have mistaken me for George Clooney.



Jeffrey Zeldman



George Clooney

**"I'm often mistaken  
for George  
Clooney."**

**You and me both, Jeffrey. Finally, what's the most beautiful thing you've seen today?**

Carrie, when she first woke up.

*[Editor's note: Carrie Bickner (soon to be Zeldman's wife) is the Assistant Director for Digital Information Design for The New York Public Library's Digital Library, and the author of "Web Design on a Shoestring", to be published by New Riders Press a little later this year.]*

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

It runneth over.

**Thanks, Jeffrey.**

**DMXzone.com** fully supports the Web Standards Project's work in wishing to help publicise the advantages of XHTML, CSS and Accessibility.

In our **Premium Content** section, we have articles on XHTML and Standards from [Molly E. Holzschlag](#) and CSS from [Rachel Andrew](#), both from the WaSP. Our series of articles for designers, "Ideas to Implementation" by [Matt Machell](#) shows how to build a site visually using CSS, XHTML and Accessibility techniques.

**If you are interested in learning more about Web Standards on DMXzone.com, please mail Bruce Lawson at <mailto:Bruce@DMXzone.com?subject=standards>**