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Dan Cederholm

CSS3 FOR WEB DESIGNERS

FOREWORD BY Jeffrey Zeldman

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CSS3 FOR WEB DESIGNERS

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FOREWORD

Websites are not the same as pictures of websites. When one person designs in Photoshop and another converts the design to markup and CSS, the coder must make guesses and assumptions about what the designer intended. This interpretive process is never without friction—unless the coder is Dan Cederholm. When Dan codes other people’s designs, he gets everything right, including the parts the designer got wrong. For instance, Dan inevitably translates a designer’s fixed Photoshop dimensions into code that is flexible, accessible, and bulletproof. (Indeed, Dan coined the phrase “bulletproof web design” while teaching the rest of us how to do it.)

In Dan’s case, flexible never means sloppy. The details always matter. That’s because Dan is not only a brilliant front-end developer and user advocate, he is also a designer to his core. He dreams design, bleeds design, and even gave the world a new way to share design at dribbble.com. Dan is also a born teacher and funny guy whose deadpan delivery makes Steven Wright look giddy by comparison. Dan speaks all over, helping designers improve their craft, and he not only educates, he *kills*.

And that, my friends, is why we’ve asked him to be our (and your) guide to CSS3. You couldn’t ask for a smarter, more experienced, more design-focused guide or a bigger web standards geek than our man Dan. Enjoy the trip!

—Jeffrey Zeldman

1 USING CSS3 TODAY

LOOKING BACK UPON THE STORIED HISTORY OF CSS, we see some important milestones that have shaped our direction as web designers. These watershed techniques, articles, and events helped us create flexible, accessible websites that we could be proud of both visually as well as under the hood.

You could argue that things began to get interesting back in 2001, when Jeffrey Zeldman wrote “To Hell With Bad Browsers” (<http://bkaprt.com/css3/1/>),¹ signaling the dawn of the CSS Age. This manifesto encouraged designers to push forward and use CSS for more than just link colors and fonts, leaving behind older, incapable browsers that choked on CSS1. Yes, *CSS1*.

We spent the next several years discovering and sharing techniques for using CSS to achieve what we wanted for our clients and bosses. It was an exciting time to be experimenting,

1. The long URL: <http://www.alistapart.com/articles/tohell/>

pushing boundaries, and figuring out complex ways of handling cross-browser rendering issues—all in the name of increased flexibility, improved accessibility, and reduced code.

Somewhere around 2006 or so, the talk about CSS went quiet. Most of the problems we needed to solve had documented solutions. Common browser bugs had multiple workarounds. We created support groups for designers emotionally scarred by inexplicable Internet Explorer bugs. Our hair started to gray. (OK, I'm speaking for myself here.) Most importantly though, the contemporary crop of browsers was relatively stagnant. This period of status quo gave us time to craft reusable approaches and establish best practices, but things got a little, dare I say, *boring* for the CSS aficionado yearning for better tools.

Thankfully things changed. Browsers began iterating and updating more rapidly (well, some of them anyway). Firefox and Safari not only started to gain market share, they also thrived on a quicker development cycle, adding solid standards support alongside more experimental properties. In many cases, the technologies that these forward-thinking browsers chose to implement were then folded back into draft specifications. In other words, periodically it was the browser vendors that pushed the spec along.

BUT DON'T READ THE SPEC

Ask a roomful of web designers, “Who likes reading specs?” and you might get one person to raise their hand. (If you are that person, I commend you and the free time you apparently have). Although they serve as important *references*, I certainly don't enjoy reading specifications in their entirety, nor do I recommend doing so in order to grasp CSS3 as a whole.

The good news is that CSS3 is actually a series of *modules* that are designed to be implemented separately and independently from each other. This is a very good thing. This segmented

approach has enabled portions of the spec to move faster (or slower) than others, and has encouraged browser vendors to implement the pieces that are further along before the entirety of CSS3 is considered finished.

The W3C explains the module approach:

Rather than attempting to shove dozens of updates into a single monolithic specification, it will be much easier and more efficient to be able to update individual pieces of the specification. Modules will enable CSS to be updated in a more timely and precise fashion, thus allowing for a more flexible and timely evolution of the specification as a whole.²

The benefit here for us web designers is that along with experimentation and faster release cycle comes the ability to use many CSS3 properties before waiting until they become Candidate Recommendations, perhaps years from now.

Now, by all means, if you *enjoy* reading specifications, go for it! Naturally there's a lot to be learned in there—but it's far more practical to focus on what's currently implemented and usable *today*, and those are the bits that we'll be talking about in the rest of this chapter. Later, we'll apply those bits in examples throughout the rest of the book.

I've always learned more about web design by dissecting examples in the wild rather than reading white papers, and that's what we'll stress in the pages that follow.

CSS3 IS FOR EVERYONE

I've been hearing this quite a bit from fellow web designers across the globe: "I can't wait to use CSS3 ... *when it's done.*"

But the truth is everyone can begin using CSS3 right now. And

2. <http://www.w3.org/TR/css3-roadmap/#whymods>