

Beginning CSS Web Development

From Novice to Professional



Simon Collison

Apress®

Beginning CSS Web Development: From Novice to Professional

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*For Mam and Dad.
Sorry about the lack of plot . . .*

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Foreword

As a bloke of that “certain age,” I can remember the television series that were shown in the 1970s and early 1980s. My brother and I would stay glued to the telly each Saturday teatime. From Roddy McDowell’s unconvincing ape suit in the TV spin-off from the *Planet of the Apes* movies, to *Logan’s Run*; from “Grasshopper” David Carradine in *Kung Fu*, to my own personal favorite, Bill Bixby and Lou Ferrigno in the pre-CGI *Incredible Hulk*; we couldn’t get enough.

These shows and many more just like them shared a common 1970s theme. While the Hulk of the original comic books just got angry, the television Banner, unexpectedly dosed by gamma radiation before he could slap on the sun block, lived outside of society. Sure, he got angry and ripped his trousers, but as he traveled across the country from place to place, along the way he met new people and helped to solve their problems—problems that no one had been able to solve before.

Like the rag-tag band of ships that followed *Battlestar Gallactica* on its quest for a faraway Earth, each of the characters in these series knew where they wanted to go, they just didn’t know how to get there. The map to Earth or Logan’s Sanctuary, or for the Hulk a course on anger management, just hadn’t been written.

By now you might be wondering, “What on Earth is Malarkey rambling on about? This book is about web design, not television trivia from the decade that time best forgot.” But as a web designer who came late to the world of meaningful markup and CSS, I can identify with the Hulk.

Solving problems is what web designers do, and not just for half an hour every Saturday teatime. We solve problems every day for our clients and for their visitors; we also solve the problem of how to implement our designs with web standards.

When I started my own journey toward web standards, I knew very little about CSS floats and positioning, and I got angry when my design layouts fell apart in a browser. While my trousers (almost) always stayed intact, I was filled with an inner rage when my columns dropped, my margins collapsed, or my font sizing misbehaved. I knew the results that I wanted to achieve and where I wanted to go, but I didn’t know how to get there. At that time there was no clear map for people like me who understood design but needed a book to show the way between my design visuals and the standards-based web pages that I wanted to deliver to my clients.

If you are starting out on a similar journey, you’re in luck. Simon Collison has written that roadmap, a book that clearly explains how to make your designs a reality using XHTML and CSS. Simon knows what it’s like to design at the sharp end of the web design business. He comes to web standards not from an academic interest but from a real need to get stuff done. I have long admired his design skills and his uncanny ability to explain complex subjects in clear language.

I know that beginning to work with web standards will sometimes make you angry; that’s unavoidable. I also know that this book will help you to keep any outbursts free from shirt button popping, trouser ripping, or maybe even car throwing. Thanks to Simon Collison, the world is a safer place for us to live.

Andy Clarke
June 2006

About the Author



SIMON COLLISON has been working with web sites for almost six years. In 1999, he didn't even have a computer and was a bit web-phobic. How times change.

As lead web developer at Agenzia (www.agenzia.co.uk) since 2002, he has worked on numerous web projects for record labels (Universal, Vertigo, and Poptones), high-profile recording artists (The Libertines, Dirty Pretty Things, and The Beta Band), and leading visual artists and illustrators (Jon Burgerman, Black Convoy, and Paddy Hartley). Simon also oversees a production line of business, community, and voluntary sector web sites, and passionately ensures everything is accessible and complies with current web standards.

Away from the office, Simon runs the popular blog Colly Logic (www.collylogic.com), and he is an active member of the so-called Britpack—a collective of laid-back designers and developers who all share a passion for responsible web design. When prised away from the laptop, Simon can most likely be found in the pub or at a gig, waffling incessantly about good music, football, or biscuits.

Simon has lived in many cities, including London and Reykjavik, but has now settled back in his beloved Nottingham, where the grass is green and the girls are pretty.

About the Technical Reviewers



Music, design, typography, web standards, South Florida beaches—what could these things possibly have in common? **DAN RUBIN**, that's what . . . er, who. From vocal coaching and performing to graphic design and (almost literally) everything in between, Dan does his best to spread his talent as thin and as far as he possibly can while still leaving time for a good cup of tea and the occasional nap.

His passion for all things creative and artistic isn't a solely selfish endeavor either—you don't have to hang around too long before you'll find him waxing educational about a cappella jazz and barbershop harmony (his design of the Rounders web site [<http://roundersquartet.com>] is just one example of these two worlds colliding), interface design, usability, web standards, graphic design in general, and which typeface was on the bus ad that just whizzed by at 60 mph.

In addition to his work on sites including Blogger, the CSS Zen Garden, and Microsoft's ASP.net portal, Dan has been known to write the occasional entry on his blog, SuperfluousBanter (<http://superfluousbanter.org>—you might even find a podcast or two if you poke around enough), and his professional work can be found at his agency's site, <http://webgraph.com>.



RICHARD RUTTER is cofounder and production director of Clearleft (<http://clearleft.com>), a web design consultancy based in Brighton, UK. Richard has been designing and building web sites for over ten years, and is a practitioner and evangelist of the web standards approach to developing web sites. He is coauthor of *Web Accessibility: Web Standards and Regulatory Compliance* (friends of ED, 2006) and *Blog Design Solutions* (friends of ED, 2006).

A more personal side of Richard can be found at Clagnut (<http://clagnut.com>), a popular weblog where he writes about accessibility and web standards issues, as well as his passions for music and mountain biking.

About the Foreword Writer

■ **ANDY CLARKE** is a sought-after designer, writer, and speaker who is passionate about design, web standards, and accessibility. He specializes in the design of user experiences for web applications and e-commerce stores, and bridges the gap between design and code. Andy writes about aspects of design and popular culture on his personal web site, *And All That Malarkey* (www.stuffandnonsense.co.uk) and is the author of *Transcending CSS: The Fine Art of Web Design* (New Riders Press, 2006).

Acknowledgments

The Icelanders have a word called *trúnó*, which they use when somebody explodes with embarrassing love for their friends, family, and colleagues. I am about to hit you with some serious *trúnó*.

My eternal gratitude to my friends and colleagues at Agenzia: Lee Hickman, Simon Rudkin, Maxwell Harrison, and Alun Edwards. Without my years at Agenzia, I wouldn't be anywhere near qualified to write this book. You've pushed me hard, and I thank you for it.

Love, hugs, and gushing praise to my unbelievably tolerant and close friends Oliver Wood, Emma Crosby, Michael Armstrong, Jamie Craven, Jon Burgerman, Lee Walker, Si, Cass, Ben, Sally, Sarah, Rick, Josh, and Rob—I'm gonna come out to play again soon!

Unparalleled thanks to my very patient Mam and Dad, and also the Granddads (who don't realize how much I admire them). Thanks too to my Auntie Christine for inspiring me to be creative when I was a nipper. I should probably thank the cats, too—Ziggy, Bear-Face, and Mute-Puss.

I can't thank the Apress team enough. I am indebted to Chris Mills (you, Sir, are a true legend), Beth Christmas, Ami Knox, and Laura Esterman (and all the behind-the-scenes folks, too). It has been a pleasure to have Richard Rutter and Dan Rubin doing the tech reviewing, and I'm over the moon that the incomparable Andy Clarke agreed to write the foreword. Collectively, you all made it so much easier.

A big thanks to my pant-wearing BritPack friends, and to the foreigners who keep me inspired (or give me free stuff), particularly Roger Johansson, Cameron Moll, Veerle Pieters, Shaun Inman, Jason Santa Maria, Ryan Carson—and anyone anywhere who has adopted or advanced web standards.

Geeky love to the ExpressionEngine team, and hat doffs to the creators of the other tools I used while writing this book: MAMP, DropSend, Basecamp, TextMate, Transmit, good browsers, my trusty Powerbook, iTunes, and the person who invented tea.

Finally, I must thank all Colly Logic readers for keeping my ego waxed, and last but not least, you, the reader, for buying the book. You've made my day!

Introduction

How excited are *you* then? Is the prospect of becoming a professional CSS genius getting you tingling in all the right places? Once you have read this book, you're going to be a full-fledged web wizard, using CSS to save you and your clients time, money, and stress.

Before you board the bus to CSS enlightenment, it is worth acquainting yourself with some of the terms bandied about by web designers and developers, and this author in particular.

Web Standards and Accessibility

This demands a brief history lesson. In 1994, as dinosaurs lay gasping their final breaths, the World Wide Web Consortium (www.w3.org) was formed to promote common approaches and interoperability for the Internet. Part of their work was to create web standards specifications such as (X)HTML and CSS, evolving these specifications in line with the requirements of web developers and web users to make the Web a better place for all of us.

For years, web standards didn't carry much weight with browser manufacturers, who were often slow to realize their importance. Web sites built using standards would render inconsistently across user agents, making the whole thing very frustrating for designers and users alike. If you weren't around in these bad old days of web design, then you are very lucky indeed.

Helping to fight the corner since 1998 has been the Web Standards Project (WaSP), which fights for standards that reduce the cost and complexity of development while increasing the accessibility and long-term viability of any site published on the Web. The WaSP team works with browser manufacturers, authoring tool makers, and web designers to push for greater web standards. Fueled by the blood, sweat, and tears of passionate, responsible web evangelists, the Web Standards Project is a grassroots coalition fighting for standards that ensure simple, affordable access to web technologies for all. Visit <http://webstandards.org>, the opening page of which you see in Figure 1, for more of the "buzz."

In 2003, a very nice man with a woolly hat wrote a book called *Designing with Web Standards* (New Riders). That man was Jeffrey Zeldman (www.zeldman.com), and his book revolutionized the way many approached web design. A core text cited by many as the beginning of the true revolution, Jeffrey's book made many think twice about how they built web sites, and uncompromisingly made the case for using CSS, while also increasing awareness of accessibility and usability.

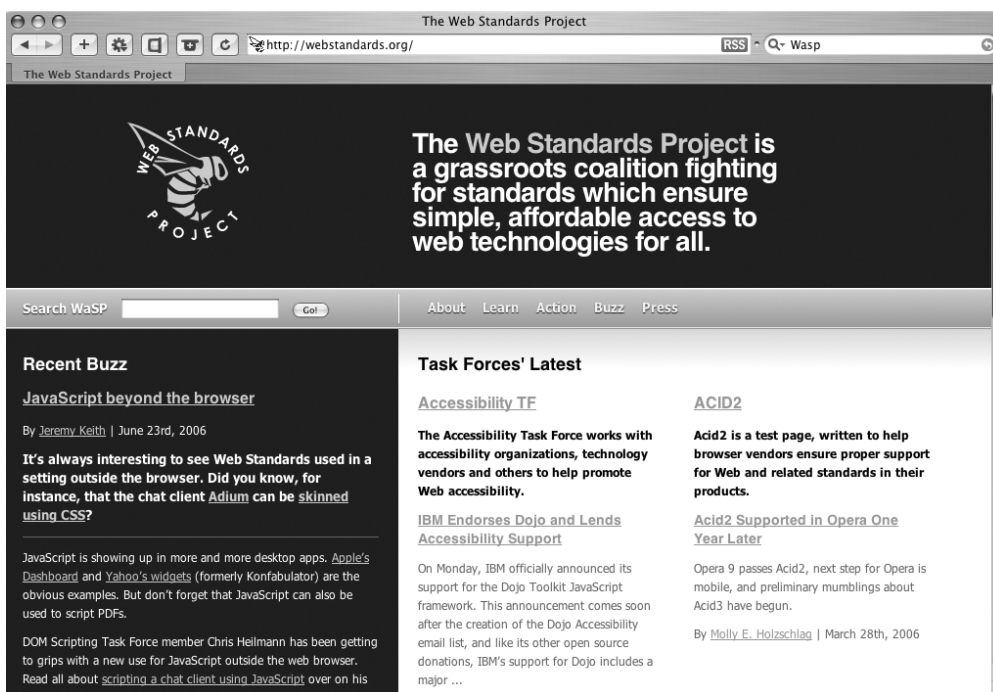


Figure 1. The Web Standards Project (WaSP) web site at <http://webstandards.org>

The Benefits

Web standards bring many benefits. Web pages are reduced in size, making download times faster, in turn using much less bandwidth. Compatibility with user agents (browsers, cell phones, PDAs, assistive software) is increased, making sites more accessible. Importantly, sites built with web standards are future-proof—primed and ready for whatever path the Web takes next. In addition, standards also are great because they allow for the separation of content from presentation and do wonders for site accessibility. Let's have a little look at what these terms mean.

Separating Content and Presentation

Perhaps the most fundamental rule of web standards is that content should be separated from presentation—by applying all decorative presentational richness using an external style sheet, the core content (the (X)HTML) remains pure and focused. With all presentational material kept separate from the markup, sitewide style changes can be made with little or no fuss by amending a single CSS file, rather than having to update every page in the site, making wholesale redesigns a veritable breeze. Equally important is the facility for users to take control of your content themselves by applying their own style sheet to your web site should they need to.

Accessibility

This is the great thing about designing with web standards—accessibility comes as default. Sure, there are further methods and approaches that can enhance accessibility and provide greater benefits to the user, but by keeping presentation separate from content, and by using the right markup for the right job, you increase the chances that any visitor, regardless of ability, can access your content unhindered.

The golden rule of accessibility is simple. Anyone, anywhere, regardless of platform, technology, experience, or ability, should be able to access your core content. By adhering to web standards with your content, you are free to apply outrageous presentation using CSS, safe in the knowledge that under the hood, none of your content is compromised, so a person with visual impairments using a screenreader will be able to use your web site just fine. Of course, web accessibility isn't just about visual impairments—there are also cognitive disabilities to consider, and many more. For more information about web accessibility, check out the book *Web Accessibility: Web Standards and Regulatory Compliance* (friends of ED, 2006) and look at the great online resources available, such as www.accessify.com and <http://diveintoaccessibility.org>.

This book specifically looks at CSS for accessibility in Chapter 14.

Making the Move Toward Standards

So, I think that by now you can see the arguments for moving to web standards–based web design . . . you probably knew before you picked up the book in fact! But why hasn't everyone adopted CSS for styling and layout? Many argue that CSS is difficult to implement; that it only works for certain browsers; that the learning curve is too steep. The big problem is that a large quantity of old-school designers are slow to adopt web standards. Many still make a living creating appallingly weighty web sites using outdated markup, often reliant on tables for layout, and littering the code with font tags and other extraneous, deprecated methods. They can still make their money doing what they do, and they don't see the need to change. These people are dangerous and should not be approached.

Still, the Internet community is chock-full of good, responsible people, and the benefits of web standards have not gone unnoticed. Since Zeldman wrote that book, thousands have made the move to CSS-based design, and very few would ever go back. The myth that an accessible site is an unattractive site has long since gone away, and some of the most accessible, usable web sites out there are also the most attractive, stylish designs thanks to smart and experimental use of CSS (see the examples in Figure 2).

I hope that after reading this book, you too will be producing designs that challenge, excite, and inspire. It's in *your* hands.



Figure 2. Stunning web sites produced using 100% web standards. From top: *veerle's Blog* (<http://veerle.duoh.com>); *BearSkin Rug* (www.bearskinrug.co.uk); *And All That Malarkey* (www.stuffandnonsense.co.uk).

About This Book

This is the book I needed when I began experimenting with CSS. If I'd had this book, I'd have saved myself an immeasurable amount of wasted time. It assumes a fairly comfortable knowledge of (X)HTML markup, but little or no knowledge of CSS. For the latter, we start from scratch.

Some books wrap you in cotton wool, gently easing you in. Not this book. The first three chapters attempt to explore the core concepts of CSS, giving you a firm foundation for the chapters that follow. CSS is a simple technology, but its magic stems from the complex approaches and quirks at the heart of the specification. Therefore, the first three chapters establish grounding for everything that follows. It is not essential to read these first, but it is important to become familiar with their subject matter so that you can quickly refer back when a technique mentioned in a later chapter gets a bit involved. For example, if I mention “the cascade” in Chapter 14 and you are not sure what I mean, you know you can flick back to an early chapter to work out what this is.

After this deep-end, lung-filling beginning, each following chapter of Part 1 focuses on styling a particular markup group, such as tables, links, lists, or text, providing a sensibly structured reference of common approaches to element styling.

For Part 2 of the book, the focus shifts to layout and real-world issues. Here, you begin thinking like a professional web designer, looking at methods for pulling everything you have learned into accessible, lightweight, and stylish templates. Part 2 also sprinkles a few extras into the mix, detailing useful hacks, filters, and accessibility techniques that give you even greater power.

Finally, many of the techniques used in the book are pulled together for the *Dead Goods* case study, which details the ins and outs of styling a living, breathing web site with pure, honest-to-goodness CSS. It's a revelation!

I have also provided a CSS syntax reference at the back of the book detailing all the properties and values covered, allowing you to look up those troublesome properties, etc., quickly and easily.

You can read this book from cover to cover if you wish, as it has a logical narrative. Likewise, it works as a dip-in reference guide for the astute designer who simply wants to get on with the job. Either way, I think you'll enjoy it.

Conventions Used in This Book

For the most part, any strange references in this book will have been explained in earlier chapters. That said, there are a few conventions worthy of your attention before we begin:

- (X)HTML refers to both the HTML and XHTML languages.
- Unless otherwise stated, all CSS is compliant with the CSS 2.1 specification.
- It is assumed that all (X)HTML examples in this book are placed within the `<body>` of a valid document, while the CSS is placed in an external style sheet linked from the `<head>` of the (X)HTML document, unless stated otherwise.
- In most cases, when an (X)HTML tag appears followed by the word *element* in the text, this refers to the whole element. For example, ` element` refers to the whole element, from the opening `` tag to the closing `` tag and everything contained within.
- Tea and biscuits are recommended throughout. For the sake of clarity, the tea is traditional English tea, and the biscuits are typically chocolate digestives.

I think that's it, so put the kettle on, kick off your slippers, and get set for enlightenment!

