"There was a point in the 90s when I felt like a sucker for doing HTML and CSS"
Jeffrey Zeldman

Jeffrey Zeldman could be called the godfather of web standards. **Oliver Lindberg** catches up with him to talk about the current state of play, how to improve standards and how web designers can survive the economic downturn

Jeffrey Zeldman went to bed at 4am last night. Geekfest SXSW Interactive is in full swing and yesterday his web design agency, Happy Cog, hosted the first annual SXSWi karaoke competition, aptly named OK! Happy Cog'aoke (www.cogaoke.com). Beforehand, his panel, From Freelance To Agency (www.zeldman.com/2009/03/31/improved-freelance-to-agency-podcast), went down a storm. But now, sitting outside the conference centre and finally enjoying a bit of Texan sunshine, he's ready to talk about one of his biggest passions: web standards.

Zeldman offers his take on the current situation: "For a long time, browsers have been becoming more and more compliant with CSS2, HTML, XHTML, JavaScript and ActionScript. So in one sense, time has been standing still since about 2000 and there have just been incremental upgrades to these browser brands. But I think acceptance of standards has been growing all this time. A few days ago I validated the top 100 United States websites according to Alexa and I think seven were valid. But if you look under the hood, there were almost no table layers or anything like that. There was a standards awareness even among the sites that had problems. It's just become normal among many developers and designers. They understand

that markup is supposed to be semantic. And there's growing interest in microformats and curiosity about HTML5. Things are happening."

Zeldman, who co-founded the Web Standards Project (www.webstandards.org) in 1998, admits that HTML5 is surrounded by a lot of unrest. Many standardistas are worried about the direction it's going in, but he thinks the overall picture isn't actually that bad. "Among the vanguard of people such as Eric Meyer and John Allsop of Web Directions North there is a frustration that things are moving slowly and they're not sure if the direction we're moving in is good. But I think the larger community, people who use Dreamweaver or just do table-based design, have started thinking about the semantics of their markup and about optimising CSS. All the frameworks that have come out are helping to get acceptance of CSS."

Keeping it simple

There's still a lot of work to be done to improve web standards, of course. Zeldman points out that the understanding isn't always there and some people think it's a good CSS layout if you use a bunch of divs with no semantic markup. Overall, he wants things to be much simpler. "I'd like to be able to design as easily as if I was using Photoshop,"

he explains. "I'd like to be able to create a multi-column layout and control source order without having to do advanced mathematics or hire Eric Meyer or Dan Cederholm to figure out the CSS because I can't. I'd also like to be able to embed fonts via @font-face as a law-abiding owner of a font. I'd like to be able to buy Franklin Gothic and use it for all the headlines on my website and not have a user able to easily pirate it, or the ITC coming after me for violating its copyright. But right now I can't use typefaces that designers have been using for hundreds of years."

The world of standards certainly can be confusing, but Zeldman doesn't see it as a huge problem that there are currently many different guidelines to web standards (he says that if you pick one and adhere to it, you're doing a good thing). "A bigger problem than multiple standards is the lack of clarity in those standards. Accessibility is like usability or even the aesthetics of design. Two designers look at a design and have three opinions about it. Validation is easy – you run your site through a validator and it's either valid or it isn't. The rest of the stuff, such as whether my logo or the biggest headline should be the h1 in my HTML, isn't so easy and is subject to interpretation. We have arguments about all this stuff. Sometimes it's silly how many arguments we have about it, but I think there's a greater good to the fact that we're having these discussions."

The greater good might be that everything Zeldman uses on the web has now been designed with web standards, which makes him very happy. "I'm not against Flash and I love the work that people such as Joshua Davis do," he

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Photography/Daniel Byrne

>> explains. "It's brilliant, but I've always been in this other area of web development that I thought was probably better for most content. There was a point in the 90s when I felt like a sucker for doing HTML and CSS and telling people about this stuff. I looked at all these people who had pure typographic control and could do animation, all this great, fun stuff, and I was this jackass saying 'No, we should use HTML'. I felt like a loser, but we won – HTML has won. That's the amazing thing for me. People use Flash for film and they use it for what Daniel Mall calls 'the experience layer' as part of a standards-based site. So there are uses for Flash, but basically HTML, CSS and JavaScript have become the real platform of the web now. I feel very heartened by that; it's the thing that makes me the happiest. Even if it's not always the best markup, what are Facebook and Twitter? They're web standards with some scripts. They may not validate, but they're still CSS layouts and simple markup, and that's great!"

Surviving the crunch

Jeffrey Zeldman founded Happy Cog, initially as a one-man business, at the beginning of 2000 in New York, when the bubble began to burst. Companies were wiped out and the economy was devastated, but Zeldman kept working. He says this downturn is like nothing he's seen before and he knows plenty of web designers who are worried about losing their jobs, but there are also lots of things you can do to survive. "You have to provide good value," he says. "If you're ethical, do a good job and become known for that, you'll get more work. Don't underprice your services. You don't have to take a job because it's from the first person who comes in. Otherwise you're going to be working on a project for three months, maybe six months and you'll be miserable. Just because the economy is bad, it doesn't mean you have to be unhappy. And you have to court clients more and communicate honestly and regularly with them. Those days when you never met the client might be over. And a final piece of advice: do cool free stuff that doesn't make you any money. It will totally grow your brand and get you clients. Putting yourself out there with your writing or your design (especially if you're a quiet, socially shy nerd who doesn't like going out and socialising at parties) will help a lot."

In a way, that's exactly what Zeldman himself did with A List Apart (www.alistapart.com). In 1998 there wasn't an online magazine that talked about web design the way he wanted to read it, so he started one. Now Happy Cog gets clients because someone read a great article on A List Apart that wasn't even written by the agency. A successful conference, An Event Apart (www.aneventapart.com), developed out of it and will come to four cities in the US this year. Plans to bring the conference to Europe have been put on ice during the recession, but Zeldman vows to revive them next year if the brand lasts.

Also in the pipeline is a web app version of the Web Standards Advisor, which is currently available as a Dreamweaver extension that enables you to validate your HTML, CSS and microformat (www.webassist.com/software/web-standards-advisor). "I'm also writing a third edition of *Designing with Web Standards*, which makes me feel like Al Pacino because they're dragging me back in. But I reread the second edition and realised it was out of date."

It's no surprise that Zeldman compares himself to Pacino; he is the godfather of web standards, after all. And, unlike Pacino, it's a given that he won't stop after three instalments. Designing with web standards has become Zeldman's life story. ●

Jeffrey Zeldman

Job Founder/executive director of Happy Cog Studios (happycog.com); publisher, A List Apart (alistapart.com)
Age "Old enough"
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Previous career Art director, writer, journalist, independent composer/producer, co-founder of the Web Standards Project
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