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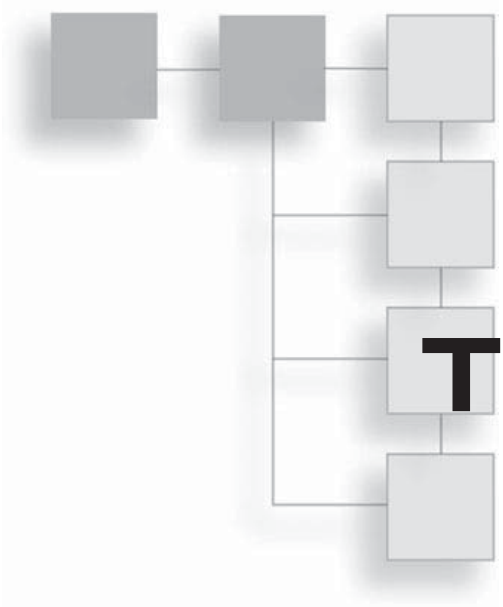
PROFESSIONAL WEB DESIGN

Techniques and Templates, Fifth Edition

Clint Eccher



Professional Web Design: Techniques and Templates, Fifth Edition

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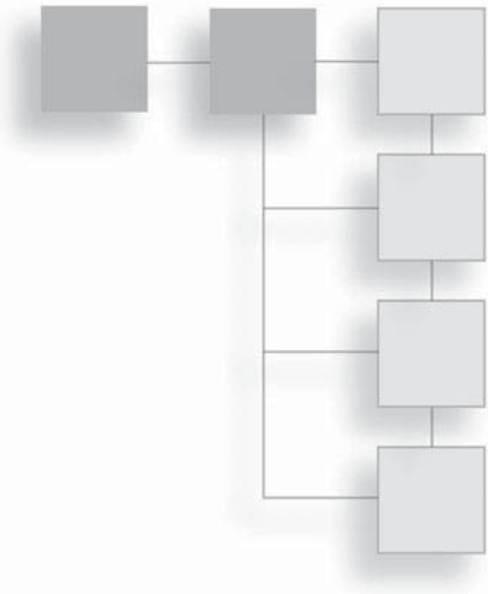

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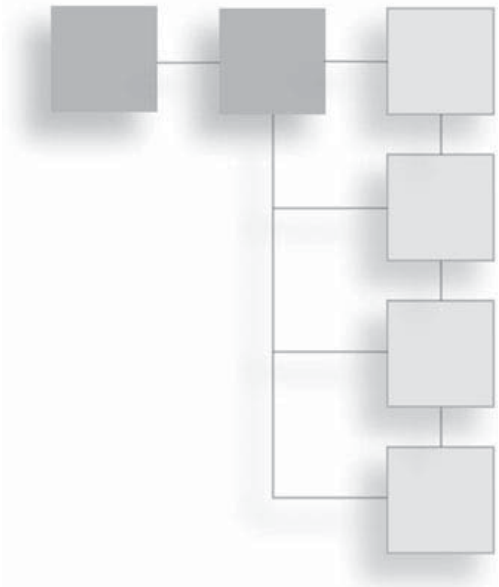
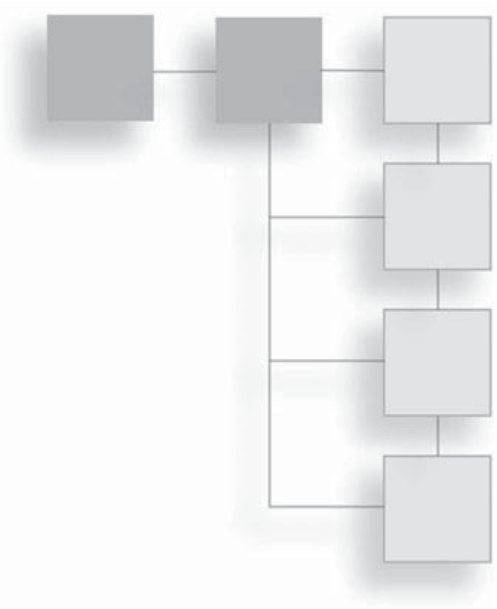
About the Author



Clint Eccher (Fort Collins, CO) is an award-winning Web designer with more than 18 years of experience designing and developing professional websites. He is the owner of A5design, a Web design company that not only subcontracts to various marketing, advertising, and IT organizations, but also is commissioned by Fortune 500 companies, local and national non-profit organizations, and small businesses for Web design and development. In addition to authoring *Professional Web Design: Techniques and Templates, Fourth Edition*, which has been published in five different languages, he also is the author of *Advanced Professional Web Design: Techniques and Templates.*

Contents



Introduction xiii

Chapter 1 Overview of Web Development Today. 1

Defining Web Design 2
Knowing the Seven Rules of Web Design 5
Understanding Three Web-Design Philosophies 7
Usability Philosophy 7
Multimedia Philosophy. 12
Mortised Philosophy 14
Summary 16

Chapter 2 Designing for the Past, Present, and Future 17

Feeling Browser Pain 17
Incorporating Usage Statistics 19
Branching Pages 22
Understanding Bandwidth 22
Building on Previous Design Weaknesses 25
IFrames and Frames 26
Image Buttons. 27
Background Images 29
Uncontrolled Color 34
Uncompressed Images 34
Thumbnails 35
Summary 38

Chapter 3 Things to Consider Before Beginning 39
Using Requirements 39
Collecting the Requirements 41
Obtaining Front-End Requirements 43
Creating a Flowchart 44
Knowing Bandwidth Requirements 46
Deciding on Resolution 47
Designing Fixed Versus Relative Sites 52
Creating Versions of a Site to Satisfy Differing Resolutions 55
Deciding on Color Depth 55
Designing for Scalability 57
Using Include Files 58
Creating a Flexible Design 60
Summary 62

Chapter 4 Enhancing Usability 63
Simplifying Architecture 63
Use a Consistent Naming Convention 64
Limit the Clicking 65
Avoid Linking the User Out of the Section 65
Create Cascading Architecture Versus Flat Architecture 66
Creating Layout 68
Scrolling Versus Not Scrolling 68
Positioning Content 69
Developing Navigation 70
Creating Consistency 70
Using Text for Menu Items 72
Deciding Whether to Use a Horizontal or Vertical Structure 72
Allowing Enough Width 72
Understanding the Different Types of Menus 73
Designing for Accessibility 75
Designing for Content 75
Summary 78

Chapter 5 Gathering Requirements and Creating a Comp 79
Gathering and Basing a Site on Requirements 80
Creating a Comp for the Client 84
Creating a Source Directory 86
Collecting and Documenting Stock Images 88
Selecting Colors 89

Deciding Layout 90
Developing Layers 92
Using Masks 94
Receiving a Decision on the Chosen Comp and Making Edits 95
Summary 96

Chapter 6 What Is Needed to Build Mortised Sites 97
Understanding the Concept of Mortising Images 98
Understanding XHTML 107
Using a Limited Number of Tags 108
Understanding Graphics 109
Understanding CSS 110
Understanding CSS Terminology 110
CSS Used in This Book 111
Block- and Line-Level Tags 113
Understanding the DocType Declaration 114
Linking to CSS Style Sheets 114
Including Print Style Sheets 114
Understanding Include Files 117
Summary 118

Chapter 7 Understanding Graphics 119
Learning about Vector and Bitmap Images 119
Learning about JPGs, PNGs, and GIFs 122
Using PNGs and GIFs 122
Knowing How PNG and GIF Compression Work 129
Using JPGs 131
Misusing Image Formats 137
Understanding Graphics/Compression Software 144
Summary 146

Chapter 8 Creating CSS Designs 147
The Basics of CSS-Based Design Works Versus XHTML Table-Based Design 147
Understanding the Box Model 161
When to Use Tables 166
Validating Code 166
Testing Designs in Various Browsers 167
Summary 167

Chapter 9 Case Study: Low-Content CSS Design 169
Understanding the Design's Structure 169
The Reasoning Behind Guides and Creating Slices in Photoshop Files 170
Understanding the Placement of CSS Containers 174
Building the Structure 175
Creating the XHTML and CSS Framework 175
Adding the Header Content 178
Adding <DIV> in Which to Nest Left and Right Columns 182
Creating the Left Column 183
Adding the Center (Right) Column 190
Constructing Second-Level Pages 196
Adding a Floating Container for Additional Content 202
Summary 210

Chapter 10 Case Study: Medium-Content CSS Design 211
Understanding the Design's Structure 211
Reasoning Behind Guides and Creating Slices in a Photoshop File 212
Understanding the Placement of CSS Containers 214
Building the Structure 216
Creating the XHTML and CSS Framework 216
Adding the Left Column 219
Adding <DIV> to Nest Center and Inside-Right Columns 224
Adding the Top-Right Images 226
Adding the Bottom, Center, and Right Content Areas 233
Constructing Second-Level Pages 242
Constructing a Second-Level Page with Three Columns 242
Constructing a Second-Level Page with Two Columns 248
Summary 254

Chapter 11 Case Study: High-Content CSS Design 255
Understanding the Design's Structure 255
Reasoning Behind Guides and Creating Slices in Photoshop Files 256
Understanding the Placement of CSS Containers 259
Building the Structure 261
Creating the XHTML and CSS Framework 261
Adding the Header Row 263
Creating the Left Column 268
Adding the Center Column 274
Constructing Second-Level Pages 287
Constructing a Second-Level Page with Three Columns 287
Constructing a Second-Level Page with Two Columns 298
Summary 308

Chapter 12 Case Study: Full-Height Three-Column Layout 309
Understanding the Design's Structure 310
Reasoning Behind Guides and the Creating of Slices in Photoshop File 310
Understanding the Placement of CSS Containers 312
Building the Structure 314
Creating the XHTML and CSS Framework 314
Adding the Rows and Columns to the Framework 317
Populating the Header, Footer, and Columns with Content 323
Constructing Second-Level Pages 330
Summary 330

Chapter 13 Case Study: Background-Based Design 331
Understanding the Design's Structure 332
Reasoning Behind Guides and the Creating of Slices in the Photoshop File . . . 333
Understanding the Placement of CSS Containers 335
Building the Structure 336
Creating the XHTML and CSS Framework 336
Adding the Header Area to the Framework 339
Adding the Body Content and Footer 344
Constructing Second-Level Pages 354
Summary 355

Chapter 14 Case Study: A CSS Form 357
Understanding the Form's Structure 358
Explaining the Style Sheet Used for the Form 361
Building the Form Row by Row 362
Adding the <FORM> Tag and Required Row 362
Adding the First Name Row 363
Adding the Last Name Row 364
Adding the Contact Name Row 365
Adding the Region and Language Rows 365
Adding the Status and Unlimited Rows 366
Adding the Purchase Date Row 367
Adding the Comments Row 368
Adding the Options to Select Rows 368
Adding the Submit and Cancel Buttons 370
The Final Product 370
Summary 374

Chapter 15 Tips and Techniques 375
Naming Rules and Properties Correctly 375
Removing Body Margins and Padding 378
Creating the Framework for a Fixed-Width CSS Design 380
Taking into Account Increasing and Decreasing Column Heights 390
Centering a Fixed-Width Design 391
Creating a Liquid Design 396
Creating a Line 397
Using Background Images as Design Elements 398
Coding CSS Mouseovers 400
Using JavaScript Drop-down Menus 401
Remembering the Order of Margin and Padding Shortcuts 402
Using the Border and Background Properties for Troubleshooting 402
Commenting Out Code for Troubleshooting 406
Using Unique Naming Conventions 408
Avoiding Horizontal Scrollbars 408
Using CSS Shortcuts 409
Understanding Font Units 409
Using Globally Driven <SPAN> and <DIV> Tags for Printing Purposes 409
Using Interchangeable Elements When Designing Rebrandable Sites. 410
Including Hidden <DIV> Tags for Future Use 412
Positioning the Line-Height Property Correctly 413
Testing Continually and Consistently. 414
Creating Source Image Files That Can Be Easily Customized and Resaved 414
Breaking Out Sections of Source Image Files 416
Creating Smart Navigation. 418
Reusing Images 418
Indenting and Commenting Code 422
Removing Spaces and Comments 422
Summary 424

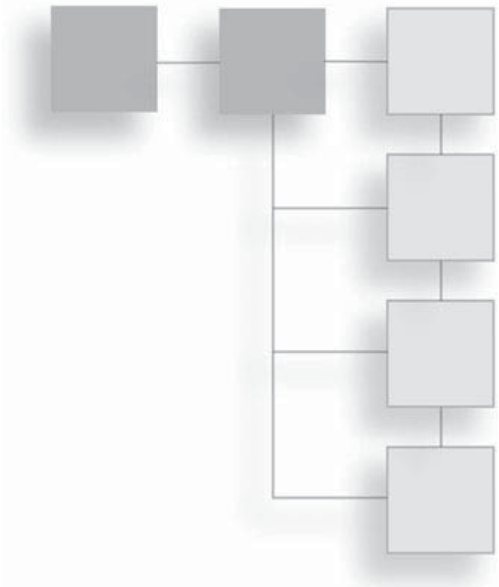
Chapter 16 Customizing the Designs Included in This Book 425
Steps to Customizing a Template 425
Step 1: Open the Main Photoshop File 426
Step 2: Customize Images and Colors 427
Step 3: Optimize and Save Necessary Images 427
Step 4: Open an XHTML (HTML), CSS, or JavaScript File. 430
Step 5: Customize Text and Code 430
Step 6: Test the Design. 432

Photoshop Tutorials 433
Replacing Photos 433
Resizing Photos 438
Changing Colors 442
Undoing and Redoing Actions 446
Summary 448

Chapter 17 Templates Included Online 449
Designs—Fifth Edition Folder 451
Designs—Fourth Edition Folder 460
Designs—Third Edition Folder 480
Designs—First Edition Folder 623
Summary 657

Index 659

Introduction



The methods and processes in which professional websites are created have not changed much since the first edition of this book. Designers still need to understand requirements, realize the technical pros and cons of layouts, create comps, save images using the correct file types, and test sites similarly to how they have been tested for more than a decade. Some of the technical ways in which these processes are accomplished, however, have changed.

Probably the most significant change that has occurred since the original writing of this book is how the framework of sites is built. Table-based HTML (HyperText Markup Language), now XHTML (Extensible HyperText Markup Language), designs had been the staple for laying out websites for many years; however, this method started making a significant change after the second edition of this book, in favor of Cascading Stylesheet (CSS) based designs. Such design involves using stylesheets to style pages, instead of XHTML table structure, which requires more code. This book fully explains the essentials of using stylesheets to lay out sites.

In the fourth edition, search engine optimization (SEO) was explored, giving the reader a strong basic understanding of how to get sites to rank better in search engines. Conversion rate optimization (CRO) also was explained, hopefully, helping the designer create a more efficient site for the users who were already visiting them.

The goal of this book is still to educate beginning to intermediate Web designers on the various issues involved with Web design. The way in which this is accomplished is through general discussion, case studies, and specific tips and techniques. There are many ways in

which designers today create sites. What is included in this design is how the A5design, the company owned by the author, has satisfied its clients since the late 1990s.

The book is written using as few technical terms as possible. While some technical terminology is always going to be necessary, a lot of it has been simplified or even excluded to help the reader understand the general concepts more easily and then apply them in an effective, quick manner. My premise is that learning is much easier once the reader gets some momentum going, which is *not* accomplished by tripping over technical terminology.

This is not to say that this book doesn't deal with specific issues that designers will likely run into, because it does. Many of the tips and techniques included in the book will be eventually experienced by the reader if he/she does enough Web design.

The tips and techniques included here come from many years of troubleshooting, pitfalls, and flat-out stupid mistakes. They have been fine-tuned, however, through creative solutions and technical common sense. After reading through this book, the reader will have a stronger understanding of what it takes to create a highly professional website.

Companion Website Downloads

You may download the companion website files from www.cengageptr.com/downloads.

Folder Contents

Code Examples: This folder contains code examples included in Chapters 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16.

- **Designs—First Edition:** This folder contains the files for each design, which includes at least one Photoshop file, XHTML file, and a CSS file.

  Designs 1–50

- **Designs—Third Edition:** This folder contains the files for each design, which includes at least one Photoshop file, XHTML file, and, in most cases, a CSS file.

  1–80-xhtml-web

  81–90-enewsletters

  91–100-signatures

  101–120-photoshop-web

  121–160-css-web

- **Designs—Fourth Edition:** This folder contains the files for each design, which includes at least one Photoshop file, XHTML file, and a CSS file.

  161–180-xhtml-web

- **Designs—Fifth Edition:** This folder contains the files for each design, which includes at least one Photoshop file, XHTML file, and a CSS file.

  181–190-xhtml-web

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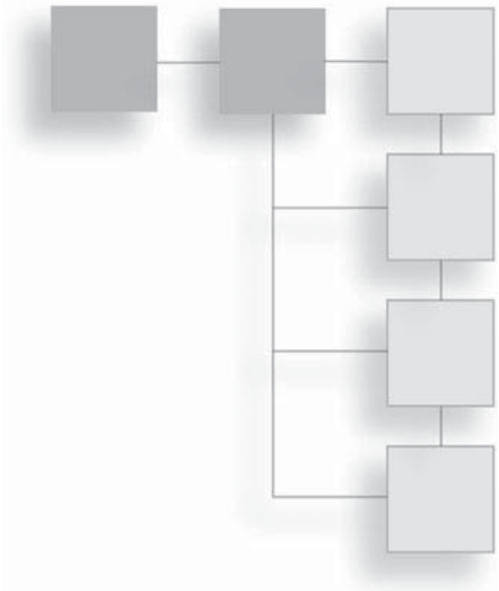
Chapter 1



Overview of Web Development Today

Since the early- to mid-1990s, the Web design industry has undergone many changes that make life easier for the Web designer. Designers used to have to worry about the download time of a website and how it would render differently in various browsers. The goal used to be that a page with all its code and images should be downloaded in less than 50k. The designer would also have to employ many tricks to ensure that the page looked the same in both Netscape and Internet Explorer. To a large extent, these are no longer issues for the designer, which allows much more flexibility and time to focus on the design itself.

Other areas of Web design have also become more complex. Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is a perfect example. Increased competition and the ever-changing requirements employed by search engines, such as Google, have forced designers to continually stay on top of changes and be creative in how they get users to a site.

Design, however, is going through very similar issues. Depending on which designer you ask, the industry will have reached Nirvana either when websites for all users are loaded with multimedia functionality or when they are stripped of all "excess" graphics and functionality.

Oddly enough, as the industry has evolved, the benchmark for aesthetic design has not always moved forward in equal measure. While there have been some fads that have required designers to create more aesthetically appealing designs, that is not always the case. Instead, the quality of Web design has actually taken a step backward in recent years. Whether it's because of the designer's drive or the client's wishes, there is a mentality of playing it safe and designing sites exactly how most of the other sites are designed,

which makes everything look the same. This issue, however, is not always one of style. Many times, the designer simply doesn't know the technical methods to make a certain look-and-feel work. This is one of the main reasons why this book was written—to help designers create sites that allow them to do what they want and help their clients communicate as effectively as possible. For the designer who produces highly professional creative work, the market will always provide many opportunities. To be able to produce such sites, though, a Web designer needs to have a thorough understanding of the basics of Web design.

Defining Web Design

Web design is an ambiguous term. Web professionals define it differently all the time. While one person might define it as programming the back-end functionality of a site, another might define design as the development of the front-end look and feel that gives a sense of the company or individual it represents. The truth of the matter is that both of these definitions are correct.

In the "older" days of graphical Web development (circa 1995), Web design meant creating static HTML (Hypertext Markup Language) pages with linked text and graphics. All content and functionality was hard coded in each page. Today's environment, however, involves creating dynamic websites that use other programming languages to interact with databases and browsers, along with XHTML (Extensible Hypertext Markup Language) pages, graphics, and CSS (Cascading Style Sheets).

A well-rounded Web designer needs to understand many of the technical and artistic aspects of Web design, although not necessarily specializing in both. Today's technical standards, in many instances, involve creating dynamic database-driven sites that are versatile, scalable, efficient, and search-engine friendly. However, if such sites consist only of unformatted pages with black text on white screens, they will not communicate as effectively to the majority of their audiences. On the other hand, if a site uses the latest graphic design methods but consists of static pages that are difficult to update or that do not enhance or simplify the user's experience, then the site is going to be more inflexible and, depending on the site's requirements, impractical.

Many of the technical and artistic issues that Web designers should consider are discussed throughout this book. Here are a few examples and explanations of what a Web designer must consider before commencing.