eview by Erik J. Barzeski

Product: Style Master
Developer: Western Civilisation
Price: $29
Contact Info: http://www.westciv.com/
Genre: Cascading Style Sheet editor
Requirements: Mac OS 7.1.2 or later, 4 MB free RAM, 4 MB free disk space, PowerPC native and 68k versions available.

hat the Heck is CSS?

What is a cascading style sheet (CSS)? Well, as explained by the Style Master manual, cascading style sheets...

...represent an exciting new opportunity for web developers. They enable much more sophisticated page design (typography and layout) than web developers have been used to, and they help us manage the complex tasks of developing and maintaining sites, and keeping them up to date.

Essentially, CSS is a powerful new tool available to webmasters. For example, the Apple Wizards website makes use of SSIs (server-side includes). Scroll to the bottom of any Apple Wizards page and you'll see a wizard image and some contact information. The HTML used to create that little section was written once and included in every file that asks for it. If I update that one file, to change my contact address or something, every page on the site would subsequently be changed.

Cascading style sheets work similarly. I can link every page on my site to a

single ".css" file, and all will take on the qualities or attributes defined in the .css file. Updating that single .css file updates the entire website. If you want to change your site's colors from the company green and black to orange and black (Halloween) and then red and green (Christmas), updating a single file could do it!

CSS gives you control over more than just fonts, colors, and alignment.You can absolutely position graphics and text (much like page layout applications), you can tile graphics behind blocks of text, and much much more.

hat's great, but is there a
downside? Yes, unfortunately.
Cascading style sheets work well
in only the version 4 browsers, and
without getting too deeply into it,
each browser has different sets of commands or methods in ways it treats your style sheets and their implementation.

As an experiment, I created a little website using Style Master and CSS (I was new to CSS as well). If you have a version 4.0 browser, hop on over to http://warehouse.applewizards.net/ . Look at the site with and without style sheets enabled. Almost everything on the site is text, stylized through a single contextual style sheet file. Take a peek at the source code. Look around. Then realize that other websites, such as http://www.furbo-filters.com/ (see black image above for a portion of their site) use style sheets much more than I've done on that simple site.

TFM (Read the Freaking Manual!)

When someone asks a stupid question, typically in a newsgroup or on a mailing list, a common retort is RTFM. This means, without vulgarities, "Read the Freaking Manual." Well, lots of people will, no doubt, have lots of "stupid" questions when it comes to CSS. I did! What does CSS do? How does it work? Selector? Class? Huh?

Style

Master comes with one of the

best

manuals I've ever seen. Actually,

it's two

manuals — one is a Style

Master

manual, another is a CSS

tutorial.
They are both quick, down to the point, and even humorous in places. And yes, both manuals make use of a simple but practical CSS theme that will help you understand the viability and practicality of this new technology.

The CSS tutorial leaves almost nothing out. While most CSS tutorials begin by explaining how to make your own style sheets, this tutorial teaches you the basics, the history, and the practicality of CSS before delving into the actual creation. The Style Master manual itself is also worthy of your attention. Style Master is an easy-to-use application, but I guarantee that you'll learn a little more by reading the manual than you would by exploring on your own.

All told, the CSS tutorial itself is worth the asking price (a measly $29) for the entire package! If you are hesitant as to whether this product is for you, download and read the documentation.

n Becoming a Style Master

tyle Master's interface is a simple, plain, yet functional one. The first thing users will no doubt explore is the toolbar (called the "Launcher"), shown at right. The toolbar provides easy access to almost every control and option available to each of your CSS selectors.

For example, suppose you set up a selector for H1 tags. After creating the selector, you might first click on the top button to set the text's style (size, color, font, etc.). Then you may click on the second button to set the text's layout (letter and word spacing, line height, etc.). Then perhaps you'd set the background (for H1 text only, not your whole site) by clicking the third button. For those who prefer to use menus, all of the Launcher commands are available through the menu as well. For control-click fans — you guessed it — the commands are also available through easy-to-read contextual menus.

A separate window contains a list of the
items
you've created. Shown at left, this list can
be
organized and items can be shuffled
around to

suit your liking. Clicking on one of the statements selects it, and more information is the statement shown in a right-hand pane. For example, specs that I've created for the A.light are:

```
color: #FF6600;
 font-family: sans-serif;
 font-size: 12pt;
 font-style: normal;
 font-variant: normal;
 font-weight: bold;
 text-decoration: none
```

Modifications to any of your statements are made via dialogs such as the one seen below.

browser compatibility feature is
ncluded by means of a simple pop-up
menu at the top of the main window.
If any part of the CSS file you are
creating is not compatible with the
specified browser set, a warning graphic (the standard yield ! icon) appears.
This is a subtle, non-intrusive way to warn users that the setting they are
creating may not work properly (or at all) in the browser of choice. My plan
of attack is to create everything as CSS1 and CSSP, then work out any bugs
in the end by simply previewing my website in each of the target browsers.

In addition, Style Master provides all of the controls necessary to create a
complete CSS file. Should you want to tile an image behind your H2 text,
Style Master allows you to type the image's path (location) in yourself or
locate it via a standard file open dialog box. You can type in Web RGB colors
(i.e. #FF6600) yourself or use the color picker in addition to a set of given
colors (red, cyan, black, etc.). It's all there, it's all accessible, and it's all
pretty darn easy to figure out.

If you get stuck, turn on balloon help — Style Master is one of only a few
applications that actually use balloon help well! Contextual menus are not
only supported, but they're entirely complete — everything that can be done
by other methods can be done via a contextual menu. Style Master lets you
get down to business and get it done quickly.

Readers familiar with my work know that I tend to beat product reviews
into the ground in the interest of exploring every aspect of an item.
However, this is not the case with Style Master — it's a simple application.
But that is perhaps its most shining point — it uses little RAM, a tiny
amount of hard drive space, and it does all you could ever ask out of a
program of this sort. That, to me, is fine, fine software.

kay, So What Don't You Like?

There are a few things I don't like about Style Master. They're minor, but I
have trouble writing reviews without having at least a few negative points.

• The window style (see above) that appears when you choose a Launcher item does not obey keyboard commands. You can't tab between text fields, and pressing command-W closes your CSS file's window instead of the windoid, which often floats over your CSS file's window. Countless times I've pressed command-W only to be forced to re-open my file. Granted, this is how these windows should operate, but perhaps opening a standard window would be more appropriate (and would thusly allow for standard keyboard shortcuts).

• Style Master is a standalone application. It can embed the CSS code into a text file, but it isn't integrated with BBEdit or any of the popular WYSIWYG programs. Integration with BBEdit, perhaps through a BBEdit plug-in, would be a welcome addition.

• I could not get browser previewing to work as expected. This was not terribly worrisome as I was often working on real-life examples (the Warehouse page, for example).

I searched long and hard for things to complain about, and these are the best that I could come up with. Take that as you want, but understand that these are minor points to me. I quickly learned to click the close box instead of pressing command-W, the standalone thing doesn't bother me a whole lot, and I rarely wish to use browser previewing from within Style Master anyway. Minor, minor quibbles... but altogether, they're a 0.5 star reduction from perfection.

onclusive Statements and Suppositions (CSS?)

If you're a webmaster looking to add a little punch to your site without complex graphics, animation, or plug-ins, cascading style sheets are a strong solution. If you agree, Style Master is the program for you — it's fast, runs in little RAM, and it occupies little hard disk space. Style Master cranks out simple, functional .css files through an interface that is as to-the-point as I've seen. The manual is worth the $29 itself, so fire up your browser and head on over to http://www.westciv.com/ for the biggest steal I have seen in the past few months!

For what it's worth, version 1.1 should be out shortly. This version promises to fix the tab problem I expressed, it will run in only 2.5 MB of RAM, and it is a smaller download. Check Western Civilisation's website for more information.

Erik J. Barzeski

erik@applewizards.net