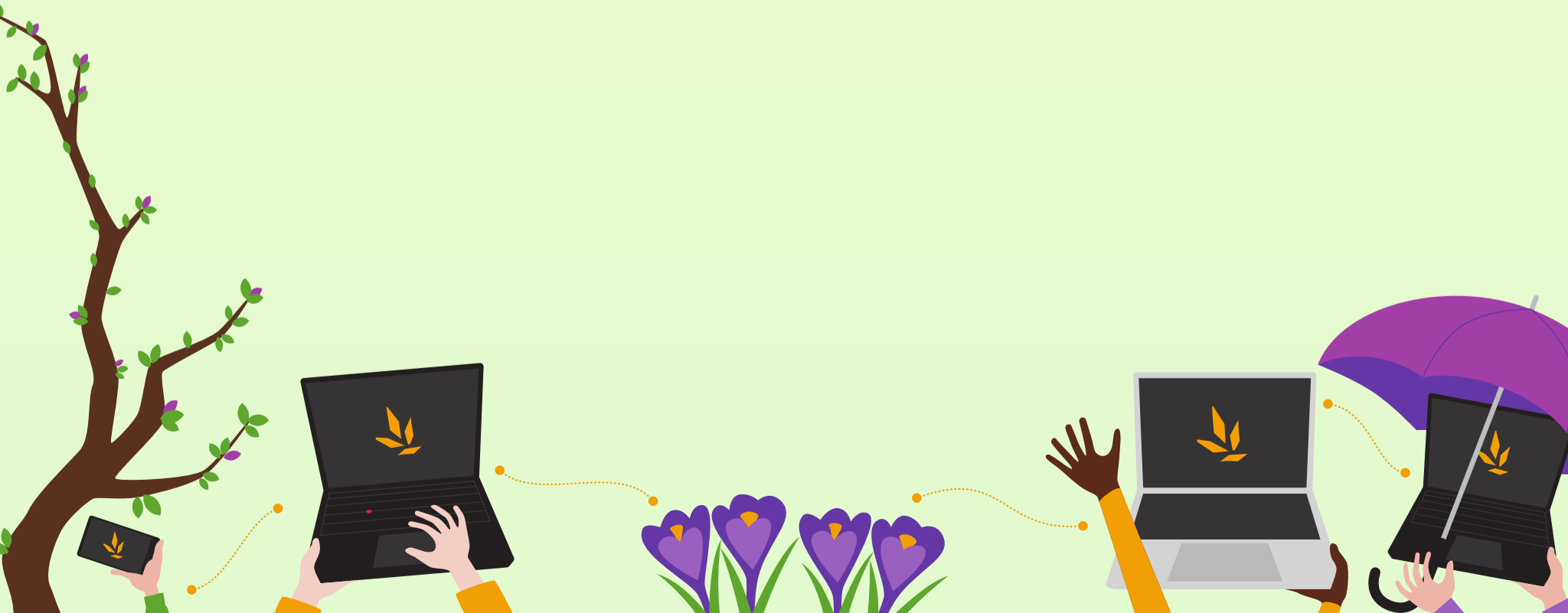# An Event Apart

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2021 Predictions

for

UX & Front-End Experts

Who We Are

There are UX and web design conferences. And then there's An Event Apart —three days of design, code, and content at a level other conferences can't match.

Founded by web visionaries **Eric Meyer** and **Jeffrey Zeldman**, and dedicated to the proposition that the creators of great web experiences deserve a great learning experience, An Event Apart brings together the leading minds in web design for three days of non-stop inspiration and enlightenment.

The pages that follow feature predictions from some of the world's top experts in CSS, design engineering, sustainable design, PWAS, inclusive design, web components, and much more.

The best way to truly learn what's next in web design is by attending **An Event Apart Online Together: Spring Summit**, a three-day web design conference with an intense focus on digital design, UX, content, code, and more—featuring 15+ in-depth sessions, live Q&A with the speakers, and more. You'll get deep insights into where we are now and where things are going next.

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Featured Experts

Ire Aderinokun
PWAS in 2021

Senongo Akpem
Cross-Cultural Design

Rachel Andrew
Advanced CSS

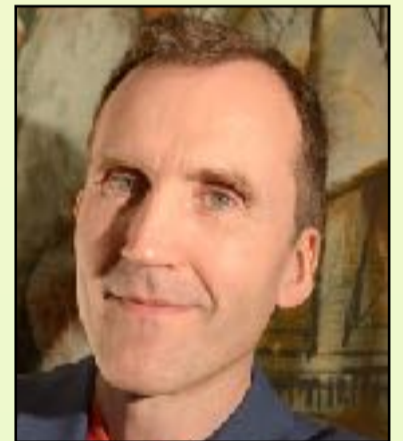**Margot Bloomstein**
Content Strategy

Ron Bronson
Consequence Design

Jeremy Keith
Reducing Complexity

Una Kravets
Modern CSS

Gerry McGovern
Inclusive Efficiency

Adekunle Oduye
Design Engineering

Morten Rand-Hendriksen
CSS Grid

Wil Reynolds
Smart SEO

Dave Rupert
Web Components

Miriam Suzanne
Beyond CSS Variables

David Dylan Thomas
Overcoming Organizational Bias

Aarron Walter
Designing For Emotion

Rachel Andrew

I'm not very good at predictions, but my safe bet is that we'll see subgrid in Chrome during 2021. We know that the **Microsoft team is working on implementing Grid into LayoutNG** and that subgrid will be part of that work. I think we will see movement on **Container Queries**, hopefully with some experiments to play with. I also think that we will see more developers taking an interest in what is possible with Houdini, and my link relates to that prediction.

Gerry McGovern

The cultural wave of sustainability that has gathered pace in the physical world will have greater impact on the digital world in 2021. Durability, sustainability, repairability, recyclability, and energy conservation will need to be addressed by digital designers at a much deeper and more profound level. Right now, much of digital design, whether it be for physical products or for software and websites, is pretty much the opposite of sustainable.

Digital sustainability will address the following questions:
1. How do we create products and services with the least amount of energy possible?
2. How do we create things that consume as little energy possible during use?
3. How do we create things that last for as long as possible?
4. How do we create things that can be easily maintained, repaired, reused and recycled?

Wil Reynolds

Links will matter less and less in the Google Algorithm, meaning Google will better understand the value of brand mentions as links.

Margot Bloomstein

If users don't trust your content, interface, and brand, they'll leave. Most people have grown cynical and skeptical of technology. Trust is built through the details, so sweat the details. That doesn't mean you have to be perfect; it's okay to describe how you're evolving and share your roadmap or plans of improvement. That kind of transparency actually builds trust. But keep your word on that timeline. Be consistent. Details matter, and trust is in the details.

(I know, I know, when all you have is a hammer, everything's a nail. But I do believe that trust in interfaces matters more than ever and it's increasingly in the spotlight.)

Senongo Akpem

Right now, machine learning in the creative sphere seems focused on image generation, animation, deepfakes, that sort of thing. I see a different world, though, where a set of brand variables, keywords, and images can be plugged in, and a full design system or pattern library gets generated out of that. As with all technology, things that seem absolutely essential to us now, may start to get taken over by raw processing power. That would mean that designers move to an even more strategic layer, no longer tasked with creating the interface and instead tasked with harnessing the beast that does the real work on the server. Also as with all technology, careful what you wish for!

Ire Aderinokun

By the end of the year, I would predict that any major native mobile application could be instead built using native web capabilities/APIs.

Jeremy Keith

This is probably more of a hope than a prediction, but 2021 could be the year that the ponzi scheme of online tracking and surveillance begins to crumble. People are beginning to realize that it's far too intrusive, that it just doesn't work most of the time, and that good ol'-fashioned contextual advertising would be better. Right now, it feels similar to the moment before the sub-prime mortgage bubble collapsed (a comparison made in Tim Hwang's recent book, *Subprime Attention Crisis*). Back then people thought "Well, these big banks must know what they're doing," just as people have thought, "Well, Facebook and Google must know what they're doing"...but that confidence is crumbling, exposing the shaky stack of cards that props up behavioral advertising. This doesn't mean that online advertising is coming to an end—far from it. I think we might see a golden age of relevant, content-driven advertising. Laws like Europe's GDPR will play a part. Apple's recent changes to highlight privacy-violating apps will play a part. Most of all, I think that people will play a part. They will be increasingly aware that there's nothing inevitable about tracking and surveillance and that the web works better when it respects people's right to privacy. The sea change might not happen in 2021 but it feels like the water is beginning to swell.

Miriam Suzanne

I'm not sure I have big predictions. I'm scared that we'll mostly see increased reliance on bloated frameworks and "utility classes" – and then Twitter flame wars around who's "right."

But I don't think I'm alone in that fear, and it's driving some interesting work in the CSS WG to find more integrated/semantic solutions to the stated issues. I know we'll see a lot of browser experimentation this year – with a strong focus on "modular" styles. Container Queries, Scope, and Cascade Layers all fall under that umbrella. It's much harder to say how long it will take for those features to become available or popular.

David Dylan Thomas

I think web design and development are going to take a backseat to social justice. I think that companies are going to find it hard to get back to business as usual, both in terms of recovery from Coronavirus and what will likely be an insurgency of violent white supremacist activity as a reaction to what will likely be a saner and more progressive administration. It will be harder and harder for us to separate design from politics and harder and harder to not bring our full selves to work. We will need to rethink what "professionalism" means and some companies (though not the majority) will actually start looking at how inclusive a given firm's (or division's) design practice is. Part of this will be driven by new internal performance metrics that take into account (with varying degrees of clarity) "inclusivity." I also think, not unrelated, we are going to start seeing discussions about unionization, licensing, and ethical review that actually have teeth in response to all of the above.

Dave Rupert

For 2021 and Web Components, I predict (read: "hope") that we'll have an Intent to Prototype from a browser around Template Instantiation. This means a native templating language for HTML, for-loops and if-statements inside our Custom Elements. I think, once we have this in place here, we'll see a coalescence towards Web Components from all the major frameworks and design systems and we'll see an end to the JavaScript Framework Wars.

Ron Bronson

In 2021, we'll see hybrid roles emerge focused on cultivating trust beyond the "trust & safety" framing. Right now, community curation is largely reactive and doesn't usually involve design except for punitive frictions aimed at slowing abuse. I see a world where design picks up the reigns and offers proactive tools to improve platforms, systems, and services and influencing the lens that other disciplines begin to measure engagement.

Una Kravets

Browser vendors and spec writers are currently experimenting with container queries again, in a more concrete manner than ever before. I predict (and hope) that by the end of the year, we'll see some significant movement in this direction.

Container queries will be the single biggest change in web styling since CSS3, altering our entire perspective of what "responsive design" is. No longer will we rely on page-based global queries to adjust the styles of individual components, but the components themselves will hold all of their own styling information, and will be able to apply it based on the properties of their parent. This means that we can reuse components much more reliably across different areas of our web pages and web apps.

That's a *massive* game changer for so many industries! Everything from design systems to publishing to e-commerce will be truly responsive, and encapsulated components become much cleaner. In 2021, I think we will enter a new era of how we think about responsive styling and components on the web.

Aarron Walter

The pandemic is prompting many to reflect on how they're investing their life energy. Soon many designers and developers will realize that work in the tech industry is not as fulfilling as they once thought and will begin looking for mission-driven work with organizations who are contributing to the greater good. There will be a talent exodus from big tech to NGOs, governmental agencies, and enlightened companies that will accelerate the advancement of many worthy causes.

Adekunle Oduye

Design engineering will become more popular due to the raise of remote work. More digital products will be needed to connect distributed workers and design engineering will help discover, design, and validate ideas. Another side effect I see will be the raise of specialized generalists who combine two or more skills (content strategist who can code, product owner who can do UX design, etc).

Morten Rand-Hendriksen

The trend I'm most excited about is the slow and steady shift away from monolithic JS frameworks toward modularization and core web features. Frameworks like **Svelte**, tools like **Snowpack** and **Rawact**, and a stronger focus on **lazy-loading modules**, all point to a near future where building and using a basic web app no longer requires lifting and carrying every tool in the React toolchest. I'm starting to think of React and its compatriots as playing the same role for **Web Components** as jQuery did for modern JS and Sass did for modern CSS: Establishing cowpaths to be paved by the web platform. Imports, components, modularization, integrated CSS, all these things are possible on the platfrom without the need for a JS framework, and the community is starting to see the performance advantages of reducing JS dependencies and relying instead on native platform features. My hope for 2021 is for the community to rediscover the power of the platform and embrace what can be done without a JS framework. That way the frameworks can focus on laying down new cowpaths while we build robust applications on the paved roads.

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More resources from our experts

- **Houdini.how** is a site that highlights the power of the CSS Houdini Paint API with a variety of demos and resources. The best part is: all of the demos shown work cross-browser using the CSS Paint Polyfill, enabling you to experiment with Houdini on any modern platform. *Shared by Una Kravets, Ire Aderinokun, and Rachel Andrew*

- **Happy Hues** by Mackenzie Child: When working on a little project or idea, if you don't want to get too bogged down in picking colors, go to Happy Hues and grab a fun little color palette that's an instant upgrade. *Shared by by Dave Rupert*

- **The Design Justice Network** has a head start on answering the critical question for design over the next ten years, which is "How do we do design in a way that does not perpetuate white supremacy and anti-social capitalist practices?" *Shared by David Dylan Thomas*

- **The Website Carbon Calculator** helps you estimate your web page carbon footprint. *Shared by Gerry McGovern*

- The lack of an ethical framework and systems of accountability within our community is becoming a serious concern not only for us, but for legislators all over the world. A great place to get up to speed are the **"Ethics In Technology Practice" resources** released by the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University. *Shared by Morten Rand-Hendriksen*

- **This viral Instagram post** Amanda Howell, MPH, created about the coronavirus vaccine is a masterpiece in fostering trust through content and design. *Shared by Margot Bloomstein*

- Want to dive deeper into using javascript for outside the browser? **Here's a great article** that teaches how to build a surveillance system using a Raspberry Pi, NodeJS, and a PIR (Passive Infrared) Sensor. *Shared by Adekunle Oduye*

- **Eleventy** is a popular minimal static-site generator. What makes it even better is the number of people writing little plugins to solve things like automated responsive-images, such as **https://11ty.rocks**/. *Shared by Miriam Suzanne*

- **Kinopio** is a great little service for gathering scattered thoughts, whether preparing for a conference talk or project timeline. *Shared by Jeremy Keith*

- **Crystal Chokshi's piece on predictive text** in Real Life Magazine is worth a read. *Shared by Ron Bronson*

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