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## Information Insider XML Starter Toolkit

**Robert J. Boeri and Martin Hensel**

*December, 2000* | If you want to learn woodworking, you can enroll in an evening course like "Furniture Making 101," then go to your favorite hardware store and buy some tools (the fun part). The good news with XML is that its tools and even training are often free and always a lot less expensive than what you are accustomed to paying for other categories of software. Another nice benefit of XML is that you can often do much more with your tools than you would first guess, and their power is growing fast.

XML was originally designed as a way to develop more functional sets of tags for Web sites, also called Document Type Definitions (DTDs), models, schemas, markup languages (MLs), or vocabularies. XML is more than that, however. The World Wide Web consortium ("W3C") is close to releasing its final version of the XML standard for graphics ("Standard Vector Language"). RealNetworks seized upon XML (via the Synchronous Multimedia Integration Language) for developing Web-delivered multimedia via its Real player (think of the Real Player as a browser for SMIL files).

As readers of this column by now understand, XML comes in two fundamental flavors: well-formed and valid. Suffice it to say that the major difference between the two is that well-formed XML files do not use an explicit DTD (although they use one implicitly), while valid XML files require an explicit DTD. All valid XML files are also well-formed.

Before you can get started with valid XML, you must have a DTD. That means you either must create one yourself or use one of the hundreds of established and emerging ones. Luckily, there are hundreds of free DTDs (typically housed by the "W3C," or by industry groups wanting standard ways to communicate. Typical places to look for the free DTDs are the W3C ([www.w3c.org](http://www.w3c.org)) for HTML, XHTML, SMIL, or the Scalable Vector Graphics (SVG); Microsoft ([www.biztalk.org](http://www.biztalk.org)) for industry initiative DTDs and Schemas—the next generation of DTDs; and Oasis' [www.oasis-open.org](http://www.oasis-open.org), (or its clearinghouse [www.xml.org](http://www.xml.org)), likewise a source of emerging industry-standard models.

Although you can view any DTD or schema with a word processor, doing that is

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akin to looking at Web sites by examining their HTML code—possible, maybe useful, but not for the uninitiated. Luckily, there are low-cost tools that let you view these graphically, modify them, convert from one format to another, or start from scratch. Extensibility (recently purchased by TIBCO) offers a Java-based interactive development suite called "TurboXML" ([www.extensibility.com](http://www.extensibility.com)). Now at version 2 and available for Windows, Mac, or UNIX, it costs under \$300 (less if you buy part of the toolkit). A similar suite at around \$150, tuned for Windows performance, is XML Spy ([www.xmlspy.com](http://www.xmlspy.com)). We consider this kind of suite a required part of your XML toolkit. Both suites provide graphic development or conversion of document models, let you create XML documents, and provide loads of other features. Both suites can even create XML models from your Microsoft Access databases, or even from well-formed XML documents.

One strategy we like for moving up to XML works well if your content is already HTML. The W3C provided a stepping stone called XHTML, the Extensible Hypertext Markup Language. Converting to XHTML gives you disciplined Web code that is viewable with modern browsers, but since the result is XML, you can then add or modify your document model (see the previously mentioned tools) and customize as you wish. One excellent conversion tool is HTML Tidy, available free from the W3C. This tool is also bundled and integrated with Allaire's Homesite, which itself is bundled with the most popular Web development tool: DreamWeaver.

One of the finest XML authoring tools we've seen is also bargain priced, compared with less functional tools of a couple years ago: SoftQuad's XMetaL ([www.softquad.com](http://www.softquad.com)), now at version 2, and available from SoftQuad for under \$500. We continue to put XMetaL through its paces with new DTDs, and remain amazed how easily we can turn around valid XML documents for prototypes or production systems. Although you can also author with Spy and TurboXML, XMetaL provides a WYSIWYG and customizable environment suitable for mainstream users, while also providing a more code-oriented optional view.

Interested in Web streaming multimedia, perhaps sound, slide shows, or even video? RealNetworks offers several products to produce streaming SMIL-based products. One of these, RealSlideshow, let's you drag-and-drop audio clips and graphics to build surprisingly high-quality streaming shows. Buy the "Plus" edition and you get free hosting for your shows.

As for freebies, Internet Explorer (version 5.5 as of this writing) has an excellent internal XML parser and is building on Microsoft's XML commitment. Netscape 6 promises more, and is aiming at an end-of-year release. RealPlayer from RealNetworks provides Web-delivered audio and video, based on the W3C's SMIL standard.

It may not last, but there are still lots of free, time-limited, and other resources available. Three of our favorite Web stops for these are [www.xml.com/pub/resourceguide](http://www.xml.com/pub/resourceguide) (managed by Seybold and O'Reilly), [www.software.ibm.com/xml](http://www.software.ibm.com/xml), and [xmlsoftware.com](http://xmlsoftware.com). These sites often offer software for free or for evaluation. Try asking hardware store sales reps if they will let you try before you buy!

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