

information insider

Visualizing XML

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EMedia Professional, March 1999
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Has anybody actually seen XML on-screen? Not just snippets of code, but XML in rich fonts and page layouts, perhaps rendered in living color? Such XML sightings are as rare as alien abductions everywhere but the X-Files. Yet XML (Extensible Markup Language) is all the rage, both as a data interchange standard and as a successor to HTML for Web publishing. In 1998, XML saw as much action as an interchange standard as it did serving its original purpose: a flexible Web-publishing alternative to HTML.

The reason? The year-old XML standard, like its venerable SGML standard antecedent, intentionally omits guidelines for document presentation. XML's presentational aspects are defined in Extensible Style Language (XSL), a new standard whose long gestation left XML relegated to data interchange. Nonetheless, XSL will be released sometime in 1999 and soon thereafter we will actually be able to view XML documents. And these documents will reside on the Web, LANs, local drives, and CD-ROM. Regardless of publishing medium, you will be able to publish a document's content once and deliver various renditions by supplying different XSL files with the content.

But what will we use to view them? A free XML-aware Web browser, or a costly SGML-XML viewer? What do proprietary viewers offer that you can't get for free in the next generation of XML-friendly browsers?

browsing for free

Everybody likes "freebies," and the 5.0 versions of the traditionally free browsers from Microsoft and Netscape promise varying levels of support for XML and related W3C standards.

At its late 1998 Professional Developer's Conference, Microsoft announced it will add broad support for XML in both Internet Explorer 5 and Windows 98. This support will include XSL, XML Document Object Model (DOM), and XML Namespaces. Using IE 5, users will be able to view XML documents using XSL just as they now view HTML documents. XML Namespaces will allow developers to name objects uniquely across local, networked, and Web-based systems, eliminating the hazards of two developers choosing the same name for a file object. Support for DOM, as

implemented by Microsoft, will provide full access to XML document content via scripts, Visual Basic, C++, and other languages.

Netscape has promised a robust XML parser permitting support for custom XML collections as well as other XML industry or standard applications such as the Chemical Markup Language (CML), and MathML, a mathematics markup language. An XML tool called Resource Description Framework (RDF) will enable the Netscape's navigation bar to point to various kinds of local files (such as email and office documents) and to Internet- or intranet-served content, including search results and bookmarks.

Caveat: While both vendors will offer many XML-related features, developers wanting to build XML applications compatible with both browsers may be limited in their choices. Apart from competitive reasons, the vendors are both anticipating what the final style sheet standards will be and, at this writing, those standards are a moving target.

XML pay-per-view

Just what capabilities do you get if you decide to license proprietary XML viewers? Two established vendors, Rhode Island-based Inso Corporation (<http://www.inso.com>) and Massachusetts-based Enigma Corporation (<http://www.enigmainc.com>) have transformed their SGML products into lean XML systems with similar, but distinguishing features.

Inso offers an XML soup-to-nuts tools suite aimed at corporate and commercial publishers. Called the DynaText Professional Publishing System, this suite offers publishing, viewing, and Web management. The SGML/XML viewer lets users view, annotate, and search SGML/XML content down to the tag level. That is, you can search for words found only within a specific tag (e.g., between the <warning> and </warning> tags). All tags can be searched. Flexible, resizable windows, the ability to add personal notes to documents, and a manager for your customizations make this a powerful viewer option. With Inso also offering a robust SDK, multiple language support, and broad platform support, it is easy to see why Inso's suite has become a popular solution.

Enigma Corporation's flagship INSIGHT viewer also allows publishing and viewing SGML/XML document collections, with subtle differences that some corporate, government and commercial publishers may prefer. INSIGHT detects previous installations on the user's computer and can preserve individual user annotations and bookmarks from previous revisions. Enigma also has developed a three-pronged mechanism for controlling access to content within a single document collection: concurrent usage tracking, time-limited access, and content restrictions, allowing access only to selected content within the collection.

Like DynaText, INSIGHT also allows rich searching within element tags. But INSIGHT enables publishers to specify which elements can be searched, speeding up searching and reducing collection indices.

Most interesting, INSIGHT provides a mixed delivery capability that recognizes the dynamic nature of many document collections. Many corporations will appreciate INSIGHT's ability to distribute documents in both Acrobat and XML and index the complete collection for searching and viewing under a single interface.

Whether you go with a free XML viewing option or choose a proprietary system, the current crop of XML alternatives assures you'll find one that best

suits your publishing needs.

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