

## XML authoring tools: small, medium, or large?

**b**y now you know that XML is the Next Big Web Thing. You're probably already familiar with HTML authoring tools like FrontPage, HotMetal, and PageMill. Doubtless you've even produced HTML from your favorite word processor with "Save As." So you're ready for XML, but where are the authoring tools? Well, a wave of XML tools is rising. Their arrival is late, due in part to the slow progress of the companion standard for displaying XML (XSL), and the subsequent near-term emphasis on XML as a data interchange format. Over a year after its specification's release, we're now beginning to find tools for authoring XML, which we've categorized here as small, medium, and large based on their cost, capabilities, and enterprise scope.

**small:** just convert what you have

As with HTML, creating XML from your word processor is enticing because it saves authors from having to learn a new tool. Getting valid, guaranteed XML from a notoriously flexible word processor is fundamentally easy, but it means paying for some expensive conversion software development work. And if you want richly-structured XML, you'll have to create a large number of style elements for the authors to pick from. Then-the hard part-you'll have to ensure that your authors understand how to use the styles and apply them correctly.

Somewhere in the process-preferably as close to the authoring as possible-there will have to be a sharp editor or QA gatekeeper, like the Hanes tee-shirt inspector in the commercial: "It doesn't say 'Hanes' until I say it says 'Hanes.'" This XML QA person must assure that the documents are written and styled correctly, or the automated conversion process will yield unsatisfactory results. Much like HTML created from a word processor, even viewable results may not look like what you expected, and the coding may be atrocious.

**medium:** **upsizing** your word processor

Want a little more control? Want to minimize retraining on a new authoring tool? At least one old favorite, WordPerfect, has acquired XML capabilities. WordPerfect 9 (included in Corel's upcoming Office 2000 offering) lets users create, validate, and save SGML and XML documents created in any document model in the familiar WordPerfect WYSIWYG environment. A separate window within WordPerfect shows a structured-tree view, providing an easy-to-read layout of the full document. WordPerfect's editing environment includes wizards and automatic element insertion. With development roots in the early '90s Intellitag SGML product, WordPerfect 9 may well be a solid SGML/XML authoring tool.

Since the Web was one of the inspirations for XML, why not use a familiar Web authoring tool to create XML? Soon, we predict, you'll begin to see support for XML in mid- to upper-level HTML authoring tools. One upcoming product with deep SGML roots, XMetal, comes from SGML pioneer

SoftQuad. Just as HotMetal extended SoftQuad's SGML authoring technology to HTML, XMetal takes on XML with a word processor-like user interface. Like WordPerfect 9, XMetal will include an XML parser to assure correct XML. XMetal will also come with sample files, document type definitions (DTDs), and style sheets to assure a quick start. SoftQuad also plans to implement the Document Object Model in XMetal after its initial release. As this product matures, expect it to provide rich XML support and to keep current with various XML-related standards.

Whither MS-Word, the 900-pound gorilla in this arena? At this time, Microsoft seems to be planning no significant XML capabilities. But once the pioneers have proven there's gold in those hills, you know who will be staking the biggest claims.

**large:** enterprise-wide XML tools

The big distinguishing features of "large" tools are their scope (enterprise, integrated with document management) and often their functional richness. Three large integrated tool-systems come to mind. Each supports the entire document life-cycle, from authoring through production and distribution. Each offers the efficiency of "write once, produce many" with outputs including paper, PDF, HTML, XML, and SGML. Each manages information, not at the whole document level, but for each document element.

One of the original SGML tool vendors, ArborText, provides an integrated suite based on its Adept authoring system: Epic. Epic recognizes the previously-noted gorilla, and offers a facility for authors to write in MS-Word or other common authoring tools, and then import the result into the Epic system. Another re-invented electronic publishing vendor, Interleaf, has developed BladeRunner, which also has an enterprise bent. Lastly, Adobe's technical publishing tool has sprouted SGML and XML wings: FrameMaker+SGML. Add Datalogic's FrameLink integration to the Documentum document management, and *voilà*: another enterprise solution.

Is there a size or style missing in this XML fashion show? XML has spawned many companion standards, such as the SMIL standard for synchronized multimedia. None of these tools provides robust support for the newest standards, but we expect there to be niche offerings that provide great point solutions, and large solutions that will support popular standards like Resource Description Framework, Namespace, and Document Object Model as the appeal of these various standards becomes clearer. ☺**IM**

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