A WYSIWYG Framework

by

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Submitted to the Fachbereich Informatik, Kommunikation und Wirtschaft
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Abstract

Browsers do not offer native elements that allow for WYSIWYG text editing. There are third-party libraries that emulate these elements by utilizing the `contenteditable`-attribute. However, the API enabled by `contenteditable` is limited and unstable. Bugs and unwanted behavior can only be worked around and not fixed. The library "Type" demonstrates that WYSIWYG editing can be achieved without requiring the `contenteditable` attribute, thus solving many problems contemporary WYSIWYG editor libraries have.

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Acknowledgments

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Motivation

Rich-text editors are commonly used by many on a daily basis. Often, this happens knowingly, for instance in an office suite, when users wilfully format text. But often, rich-text editors are being used without notice. For instance when writing e-mails, entering a URL inserts a link automatically in many popular e-mail-applications. Also, many applications, like note-taking apps, offer rich-text capabilites that go unnoticed. Many users do not know the difference between rich-text and plain-text writing. Rich-text editing has become a de-facto standard, that to many users is *just there*. Even many developers do not realise that formatting text is a feature that needs special implementation, much more complex than plain-text editing.

While there are APIs for creating rich-text input controls in many desktop programming environments, web-browsers do not offer native rich-text inputs. However, third-party JavaScript libraries fill the gap and enable developers to include rich-text editors in web-based projects.

The libraries available still have downsides. Most importantly, only a few of them work. As a web-developer, the best choices are either to use CKEditor or TinyMCE. Most other editors are prone to bugs and unwanted behaviour. Piotrek Koszuliński, core developer of CKEditor comments this on StackOverflow as follows:

> *Don't write wysiwyg editor[sic] - use one that exists. It's going to consume all your time and still your editor will be buggy. We and guys from other... two main editors (guess why only three exist) are working on this for years and we still have full bugs lists ;).*[1]

A lot of the bugs CKEditor and other editors are facing are due to the fact that they rely on so-called "HTML Editing APIs" that have been implemented in browsers for years, but only been standardized with HTML5. Still, to this present day, the implementations are prone to noumerous bugs and behave inconsitently across different browsers. And even though these APIs are the de-facto standard for implementing rich-text editing, with their introduction in Internet Explorer 5.5, it has never been stated they have been created to be used as such.

It's a fact, that especially on older browsers, rich-text editors have to cope with bugs and inconsistencies, that can only be worked around, but not fixed, as they are native to the browser. On the upside, these APIs offer a high-level API to call so-called "commands" to format the current text-selection.

However, calling commands will only manipulate the document's DOM tree, in order to format the text. This can also be achieved without using editing APIs, effectively avoiding unfixable bugs and enabling a consistend behaviour across all browsers.

Furthermore CKEditor, TinyMCE and most other libraries are shipped as user interface components. While being customizable, they tend to be invasive to web-projects.

This thesis demonstrates a way to enable rich-text editing in the browser without requiring HTML Editing APIs, provided as a GUI-less software library. This enables web-developers to implement rich-text editors specific to the requirements of their web-projects.

[1] http://stackoverflow.com/questions/11240602/paste-as-plain-text-contenteditable-div-textarea-word-excel/11290082112900082, last checked on 07/13/2015

1.2 Structure

The first part of this thesis explains rich-text editing on desktop PCs. The second part explains how rich-text editors are currently being implemented in a browser-environment and the major technical differences to the desktop. Part three will cover the downsides and the problems that arise with the current techniques used. Part four will explain how rich-text editing can be implemented on the web bypassing these problems. Part five dives into the possibilities of web-based rich-text editing in particular when using the techniques explained in this thesis.

Chapter 2

Word processing on desktop PCs

2.1 Plain text word processing

Chapter 3

Word processing on the web

3.1 Plain text word processing

Chapter 4

DOM manipulation

In October 1998 the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) published the "Document Object Model (DOM) Level 1 Specification". This specification includes an API on how to alter DOM nodes and the document's tree[1]. It provided a standardized way for changing a website's contents. With the implementations of Netscape's JavaScript and Microsoft's JScript this API has been made accessible to web developers.

4.1 HTML Editing APIs

In July 2000, with the release of Internet Explorer 5.5, Microsoft introduced the contentEditable and designMode IDL attributes along with the contenteditable content attribute[2][3]. These attributes were not standardized and not part of the W3C DOM specifications.

By setting `contenteditable` or `contentEditable` to "true" or `designMode` to

[1]http://www.w3.org/TR/REC-DOM-Level-1/level-one-core.html, last checked on 07/10/2015
[2]https://msdn.microsoft.com/en-us/library/ms533720(v=vs.85).aspx, last checked on 07/10/2015
[3]https://msdn.microsoft.com/en-us/library/ms537837(VS.85).aspx, last checked on 07/10/2015

Attribute	Type	Can be set to	Possible values
designMode	IDL attribute	Document	"on", "off"
contentEditable	IDL attribute	Specific HTMLElements	boolean, "true", "false", "inherit"
contenteditable	content attribute	Specific HTMLElements	empty string, "true", "false"

Table 4.1: Editing API attributes

”on”, Internet Explorer switches the affected elements and their children to an editing mode. In editing mode it is possible to

1. Let the user interactively click on and type inside text elements

2. Execute ”commands” via JScript and JavaScript

Fetching user inputs (clicking on elements, accepting keyboard input and modifying text nodes) is handled entirely by the browser. No further scripting is necessary other than setting the mentioned attributes on elements. This behavior is inherited by child elements.

In editing mode, calling the method `document.execCommand` will format the currently selected text. Calling `document.execCommand('bold', false, null)` will wrap the currently selected text in `<b>` tags. `document.execCommand('createLink', false, 'http://google.com/')` will wrap the selected text in a link to google.com. However, this command will be ignored, if the current selection is not contained by an element in editing mode.

While `designMode` can only be applied to the entire document, `contentEditable` and `contenteditable` attributes can be applied to a subset of HTML elements as described on Microsoft's Developer Network (MSDN) online documentation[4].

With the release of Internet Explorer 5.5 and the introduction of editing capabilities, Microsoft released a sparse documentation[5] describing only the availability and the before-mentioned element restrictions of these attributes.

According to Mark Pilgrim, author of the ”Dive into” book series and contributor to the the Web Hypertext Application Technology Working Group (WHATWG), Microsoft did not state a specific purpose for its editing API, but, its first use-case has been rich-text editing[6].

In March 2003, the Mozilla Foundation introduced an implementation of Microsoft's designMode, named Midas, for their release of Mozilla 1.3. Mozilla names

[4]https://msdn.microsoft.com/en-us/library/ms537837(VS.85).aspx, last checked on 07/10/2015
[5]https://msdn.microsoft.com/en-us/library/ms537837(VS.85).aspx, last checked on 07/10/2015
[6]https://blog.whatwg.org/the-road-to-html-5-contenteditable, last checked on 07/10/2015

this "rich-text editing support" on the Mozilla Developer Network (MDN)[7]. In June 2008, Mozilla added support for contentEditable IDL and contenteditable content attributes with Firefox 3.

Mozilla's editing API resembles the API implemented for Internet Explorer, however, there are still differences (compare [89]). Most notably, Microsoft and Mozilla differ in the commands provided to pass to document.execCommand[10][11] and the markup generated by invoking commands[12]. In fact, Mozilla only provides commands dedicated to text editing while Microsoft offers a way to access lower-level browser components (like the browser's cache) using execCommand. This may show, that even though rich-text editing was its first use case and Mozilla implemented it naming it that, this editing API was not originally intended to be used as such.

In March 2008, Apple released Safari 3.1[13] including full support for contentEditable and designMode[14], followed by Opera Software in June 2006[15] providing full support in Opera 9[16]. MDN lists full support in Google Chrome since version 4[17], released in January 2010[18].

Around the year 2003[*MeineTabelle*] the first JavaScript libraries emerged that made use of Microsoft's and Mozilla's editing mode to offer rich-text editing in the browser. Usually these libraries were released as user interface components (text fields) with inherent rich-text functionality and were only partly customizable.

[7]https://developer.mozilla.org/en/docs/Rich-Text_Editing_in_Mozilla, last checked on 07/10/2015

[8]https://msdn.microsoft.com/en-us/library/hh772123(v=vs.85).aspx, last checked on 07/10/2015

[9]https://developer.mozilla.org/en-US/docs/Midas, last checked on 07/10/2015

[10]https://developer.mozilla.org/en-US/docs/Midas, last checked on 07/10/2015

[11]https://msdn.microsoft.com/en-us/library/ms533049(v=vs.85).aspx, last checked on 07/10/2015

[12]https://developer.mozilla.org/en/docs/Rich-Text_Editing_in_MozillaInternet_Explorer_Differences, last checked on 07/10/2015

[13]https://www.apple.com/pr/library/2008/03/18Apple-Releases-Safari-3-1.html, last checked on 07/10/2015

[14]http://caniuse.com/feat=contenteditable, last checked on 07/10/2015

[15]http://www.opera.com/docs/changelogs/windows/, last checked on 07/10/2015

[16]http://www.opera.com/docs/changelogs/windows/900/, last checked on 07/10/2015

[17]https://developer.mozilla.org/en-US/docs/Web/Guide/HTML/Content_Editable, last checked on 07/10/2015

[18]http://googlechromereleases.blogspot.de/2010/01/stable-channel-update_25.html, last checked on 07/10/2015

In May 2003 and March 2004 versions 1.0 of "FCKEditor" and "TinyMCE" have been released as open source projects. These projects are still being maintained and remain among the most popular choices for incorporating rich-text editing in web-based projects. *// Technik, wie diese Editoren funktionieren erklÃđren.*

Appendix A

Tables

Table A.1: Armadillos

Armadillos	are
our	friends

Appendix B

Figures

Figure B-1: Armadillo slaying lawyer.

Figure B-2: Armadillo eradicating national debt.

Bibliography