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Tim Berners Lee and reinventing HTML

Sunday, October 29, 2006

I read with great interest Tim Berners Lee's "[Reinventing HTML](#)". Its a positive step, and an acknowledgement that the web developer community should also be a part of the standards process. Particularly the HTML Working Group is the target of focus, and that comes as a surprise.

Tim notes:

The perceived accountability of the HTML group has been an issue. Sometimes this was a departure from the W3C process, sometimes a sticking to it in principle, but not actually providing assurances to commenters. An issue was the formation of the breakaway WHAT WG, which attracted reviewers though it did not have a process or specific accountability measures itself.

Web Applications and Compound Documents

As far as I recall, it wasn't the actions (or inaction) of the HTML Working Group that lead to the formation of the WHAT WG. It was the Web Applications and Compound Documents workshop where Ian Hickson found himself in a tiny minority expressing the importance of backwards compatibility. His [position paper](#) advocated that "any successful framework would have to be backwards compatible with the existing Web content, and would have to be largely implementable in Windows IE6 without using binary plug-ins (for example using scripted HTCs)". Hickson obviously saw this as a potential conflict, as he notes - 2 years ago:

It is going to be very interesting to see how this unfolds. For us (the Web browser vendors: Opera, Mozilla, and Apple), the "backwards compatible" requirement is not really negotiable, because it is quite clear that solutions that don't work in the market leader's browser won't be accepted by mainstream Web developers. I think a lot of people in the W3C world are having difficulty accepting this, especially given that Microsoft have basically said that IE has been end-of-lined (it is my understanding that IE in the next version of Windows will have no changes to its HTML/CSS/DOM/XML implementations

and still no support for XHTML, and Microsoft have also stated that there will be no new separately-downloadable versions of IE available anyway, so even if they did upgrade it, it would only be used by those who upgraded their operating system).

Backlash against backwards compatibility

Before the workshop, Hickson confides his fear:

I'm very much at a loss as to what to expect from this workshop. On the one hand I really can't see us convincing everyone else that the solution is to continue down the HTML path. After all, it's not in the interests of most of the other attendees. Many of them are wanting to sell SVG, XForms, or XHTML products, and most of those who aren't are probably more concerned with developing a good theoretical solution than addressing the unfortunate pragmatic needs of today's authors.

The workshop participants reached an audible consensus when "the only sustained spontaneous clapping of the entire day came as someone suggested, in response to my [Hickson's] brief statement of how backwards compatibility is critical, that it was about time to drop HTML and Windows IE6 from the roadmap."

Independent spirit

And since browser vendors and web developers prefer a backwards compatible roadmap, it comes as no surprise Hickson entertains the idea of "doing his own thing":

We, of course, want the W3C to go down our chosen route. Since there doesn't seem to be much consensus on doing that, though, the question is what should we do now? Should we do our own thing (in public of course) and then submit it to the W3C (or IETF or ECMA) at some future point once we have initial implementations? Should we simply do our own thing (Opera, Mozilla, and a few interested parties) and forget standardisation altogether? Should we just take part in whatever Web Applications working group the W3C sets up and implement whatever comes out of that in several years' time, despite being fully aware that few people will ever use it? (Which is a foregone conclusion since it wouldn't work in Windows IE6.)

I'm leaning towards the first of the three at the moment. I guess the Opera and Mozilla people will have to discuss this in more detail before we decide anything though.

As I understand it, that was the thread of events and thoughts that lead to the formation of WHAT WG, which supported the web developer vision of the web as being the basis of web applications. Two years on, and hindsight suggests that progress on the web has largely been as a result of the impressive work of WHAT WG, under Ian Hickson's stewardship.

The death of SVG

SVG is no longer a relevant web technology (and never was). SVG's certified death - being a still-born technology - came with Adobe's purchase of Macromedia, and with it the acquisition of the Flash virtual machine. With Flash, who needs SVG? Flash is the platform that the W3C are essentially looking for.

The positive note from Tim Berners Lee is the acknowledgement that XForms has to be backwards compatible with the current Web - that may be the lifeline XForms needs to encourage its adoption.

Update 30/10/2006: stelt writes in to say:

I have a different opinion on SVG. Flash has an overlap in functionality, but also an intrinsic limitation as it is not fully open. Calling Flash a winner is rather black and white. The number of mass use examples on <http://svg.startpagina.nl> is growing, and in some fields Flash is not really a serious contender even. And what about Java WebStart, applets, (Mozilla) XUL, etc. ?

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