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W3C? WHATWG? Standards?



Stephen Boyd

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Yes, you read that title right, this is about... Standards.

When I first started my career as a web developer I had no idea what W3C or WHATWG was. I was quickly thrown where I was needed in the role of setting up and creating automated end-to-end tests.

In the UI testing community, I kept hearing about these W3C standards being referenced.

These references were dictating what our automation framework could and could not do. I was perplexed!

During my research into this topic, I stumbled onto what the W3C is and came across another entity of which I was totally unaware. WHATWG.



In the red corner... W3C!

The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), according to their About page, is the community where organizations, staff, and the public work together to develop Web standards.

These standards are used in many different tools we all use every day. They dictate many of the standards implemented by user agents (web browsers), such as Chrome, Firefox, Edge, etc...

They also create standards for accessing the web through network traffic from any device, such as televisions, printers and even cars!

And in the blue corner... WHATWG!

They formed in 2004 after a W3C workshop announced that the W3C was going to be focusing on XHTML over HTML. There seems to be a little bit of bad blood between WHATWG and W3C.

From their FAQ:

The WHATWG was founded by individuals of Apple, the Mozilla Foundation, and Opera Software in 2004, after a W3C workshop. Apple, Mozilla and Opera were becoming increasingly concerned about the W3C's direction with XHTML, lack of interest in HTML, and apparent disregard for the needs of real-world web developers. So, in response, these organisations set out with a mission to address these concerns and the Web Hypertext Application Technology Working Group was born.

Sounds like they are still holding a grudge.

Web Hypertext Application Technology Working Group (WHATWG) is where many modern HTML standards live. I have found some pretty cool information glancing through them, and I may even find time someday to read through a lot of them.

What's the difference?

The difference may not be apparent, but sometimes the two don't always agree on a standard. You may sometimes see differences in how they describe different elements, or how they recommend different elements be used.

However, it seems that they may be working together soon in order to remove all the confusion the two competing standards have caused.

In this memorandum, it is stated:

HTML and DOM shall be developed principally in the WHATWG, following WHATWG Living Standard (LS) specification process. W3C intends to give input to and endorse WHATWG Review Drafts to become W3C Recommendations

This means that W3C is passing the HTML and DOM standards over to WHATWG, however in a collaborative process. W3C will still have their input.

Hopefully, this means less confusion in the future for HTML standards and a more unified front in advancement.

Why are they important?

Without these standards in place, the world would be chaos!

Well not really chaos, but it would be nowhere near where it is today in terms of the World Wide Web.

These standards bring a type of order to the lives of users and developers alike, because without them your website would look different on every browser that you use, or would not even work at all!

They have standards or are working on standards, for almost every piece of Web technology that has been created or is in the process of being created.

Why should developers care about either?

If it is not obvious enough already why developers should care, I'll lay out a few more reasons.

Standards for creating webpages

Without these standards, we as developers would have to make a choice. Create our site individually for each browser, or just pick one browser and develop for that.

Obviously, for any site, this would be chaos. The return on the investment here would be so little that it would be pointless to even try. Startup companies cannot afford the time or money to create all of these different sites just so every possible customer can see it.

This means we probably wouldn't have tech giants like Amazon. A modern world without Amazon just doesn't seem to make much sense!

Technical Information

WHATWG has a wide variety of different specifications, and technical standards/guidance.

What really sold me on WHATWG was the level of detail they have about damn near everything.

They have a whole standard dedicated to sectioning elements, what each one is, does, can do, and attributes it can have. The longer you look, the more information you will

find.

W3C also has its own standards, but as I mentioned above, hopefully, their collaboration will be fruitful.

Accessibility Standards

I've met many developers who may not understand accessibility fully. Or due to fast-paced sprint work, it gets overlooked. I've also met devs who are obsessed with it.

The W3C creates all these standards for developers and browsers alike for accessibility.

Speak of accessibility, here are some articles published in the W3C's Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI): <https://www.w3.org/WAI/tips/>

Many more standards

They have many more standards that influence everybody's day to day life in one way or another.

Visit here to get started looking into them:

<https://www.w3.org/standards/>

<https://spec.whatwg.org/>

Leaving thoughts

Many developers view these standards as something that someone else should be looking at. However, I argue that everyone working with web technologies should understand what the W3C and WHATWG are, and how they can leverage those standards to create better technologies.