JIM RAPOZA: TECH DIRECTIONS

Reanimating HTML

NEW STANDARD IS GOOD, BUT DEVELOPMENT MUST BE WATCHED

WHEN IT comes to the technologies that make up the World Wide Web, one thing is certain: HTML clearly represents the past. HTML, you did a great job in building the foundation of the Web, but, today, the future of the Web belongs to XML, Extensible HTML and multiple scripting languages. So long, HTML!

Wait a second. What's that? The World Wide Web Consortium has announced the formation of a new HTML working group chartered to create the next HTML standard? OK, scratch everything I just said.

If you've been following Web standards and the W3C, you're probably as surprised as I was by this news. For a while now, it's been standard doctrine that HTML was the past, that new work wouldn't be done on the standard and that all standard Web development should be moving to XHTML. Now the W3C is telling us not only that it is planning to release new versions of HTML but also that it is chartering a whole new group to do it.

And if one investigates the official sources of this news, not many questions are answered. The press release at the W3C Web site (www.w3.org/2007/03/html-pressrelease) provides some info, but not much.

Somewhat surprisingly, one of the best sources of information on this change is a post that Web creator and W3C head Tim Berners-Lee wrote on his blog back in October. Titled "Reinventing HTML" (dig.csail.mit.edu/breadcrumbs/node/166), the post breaks down many of the reasons for the renewed pulse of HTML; explains how the new standards will interact with XHTML and other, newer Web technologies; and describes future plans.

I have to admit that when I initially saw the HTML announcement, my reaction was, "Oh, great. Now there will be even more confusion around Web standards." But reading Sir Tim's blog post helped to roll back most of this fear.

I can definitely see why the decision was made to restart work on HTML. The standard has been in a strange place for years now. It won't

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go away—many, many sites still heavily use pure HTML—but it is used in radically different ways by everyone, from those who use it as a simple wrapper around more advanced code to those who push the abilities of the language to the very limit.

This is a bad place for a standard—and the technologies that rely on it—to be. When a standard is stagnant, but still in heavy use, developers and software vendors begin to get very creative in coming up with ways to make the standard work with modern technologies and requirements. This can often lead to proprietary coding, which leads to fragmentation and a return to sites that work differently for different browsers and systems.

For the most part, I like what seems to be the planned direction of the new

HTML working group. One word that is repeated in Berners-Lee's post and in some of the other materials is "incremental." A plan to keep HTML moving forward in small steps that avoid breaking lots of things sounds like a good idea to me.

I also like that the plan is for the new HTML group to collaborate with those working on the XHTML standards and with WebForms and XForms. Hopefully, this will keep the standards moving forward in parallel rather than in fits and starts.

Given the way that W3C standards groups work, it will probably be about a year before we get close to even a working draft of a new HTML standard. (Whether that standard will be HTML 5.0 or some other naming convention isn't clear at this time.) And, based on the working group's charter, it will be three years before a full standard release.

But anyone who builds Web applications or creates products for Web development should keep a very close eye on the new HTML working group. Based on experience with past standards, different groups will try to pull the standard in directions that may not be the best for all stakeholders. All interested groups need to be vigilant against these kinds of moves.

Nevertheless, I think the move to reanimate HTML is a good one. You can't have a vibrant and healthy Web if its foundation is stagnant. **e**

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