

Web 2.1

Eric Blair

18 March 2007

Some people, expecting a different format in a blog, wonder why all my entries are six page essays. Why don't I ever just talk about what I had for lunch, like a proper blog?

But, in fact, I do—on the RSS feed. [If you don't know what RSS is, well, it's time; go check Wikipedia.]

We can roughly divide the world's web pages into those that are single-topic and probably not frequently updated, like a course web site or a page on wicker collectibles, and those that are updated on a regular basis, like blogs, The Onion, and the New York Times.

The regularly-updated pages have more-or-less converged to an agreement about look and functionality. They have a three-column layout, the entries are in the center column, which is usually 200 screens tall, and divided into entries, and each entry has a button to click to go to the entry page. You can comment, click various buttons regarding social networking, and so on. You know the drill very well.

Let us ask the ten-year question: ten years from now, will people be doing it this way? From my perspective, the answer is a solid no. As in Figure One, there are many other ways to get a single blob of oft-updated information than via a web page in a web browser on a desktop computer. I personally spend most of my time in an RSS reader, and only go to other pages when I need information about the Gamma distribution or wicker collectibles. [By the way, I get the impression that most of the individually-run sites about such things have basically been eaten by Wikipedia, for better or for worse.] For most of the regular-update sites I read every day, I don't even know what they look like any more.

It's all about that blob of new information. The graphics are nice, but not superurgent. The Digg This! button is frankly more for the benefit of the author, not the reader.



Figure 1: Yes, that is an RSS button on a telephone.

As for the comments, I'll get to those below. The link list, search box, and a few other details are nice, but 90% of the time I just want that single new blob of information. So how can that blob be delivered?

RSS is perfect for blob delivery, which is why it is gaining in popularity. And with RSS comes the realization that it doesn't have to be in a web page on a web browser on a desktop computer.

I'm enamored of Internet appliances, not in the sense of smallish computers that read web pages on web browsers, but things like voice-over-IP telephones. Mr DRC of Indianapolis, IN can't stop raving about a device he plugs into his stereo that connects to his wireless network and streams Internet radio stations. During the whole Net Neutrality thing, the anti-neutrality side kept talking about an Internet heart rate monitor that would constantly communicate with the hospital. I don't know if such a thing exists (and if it does, it's certainly not going to need major bandwidth or bandwidth priority), but it's a great example of what could be done.

And yes, I do often read RSS feeds on my telephone.

So the thing that bothers me about the Web 2.0 mini-revolution is the *Web* part. The fundamental premise of the question "How can we make our web pages more interactive, useful, and fun?" is that there is a web browser involved, and there really doesn't have to be.

So, I've started posting entries to this page's RSS feed with no web page attached. Each such entry is a single blob of information, with no search box, no picture of my beaming face, no linkroll. That's all on this page whenever you need it. The longer essays, which aren't so easy to read on a telephone, are still here in big print so you don't strain your eyes, or PDF format for reading in the bathroom.

Mr AF of Washington, DC points out that there's nowhere to comment on my obnoxious ranting in an RSS feed. But comments are also small blobs of information, so they would fit comfortably on a feed as well. You can post them on your own feeds, or appropriate mechanisms for submitting to somebody else's feed will no doubt avail themselves—there are already many web sites with comment RSS feeds. I.e., it'll work itself out.

Summary: If we're still using a browser ten years from now, it won't look like it does today, and it won't be a central part of our lives, because we'll have a dozen other ways to get small blobs of information from both friends and newspapers. Also, if you haven't subscribed to this page's RSS feed, you'll never know what I had for lunch today.

On XML Having completed that thought, let me swing to a brief editorial on the use of Extensible Markup Language, XML. You see those three letters often, and they are often given Messianic attributes, so let me take a minute and discuss the format in further detail.

XML is intended to intersperse data with metadata, such as specifying that the text "Web 2.1" is a title, and the text "Eric B Blair" is an author. Are there other ways to do this? Sure. A myriad. XML just happens to be relatively easy for a computer to read and write.

[Incidentally, many alternatives are easier for humans to write, because XML requires a lot of redun-

dancy and odd situations where you need to replace `<` with `<`; and so on. The XML validation process is hard. Me, I write everything in \LaTeX and use `latex2html` to produce the web page. This has proven to be much more human-friendly, plus you get the PDF version for free.]

An XML document really has two parts: the document itself, and a document type definition (DTD) which is basically a table listing what tags are valid. But even this is not sufficient to parse a document. Now that I know that `xls:wkdy` or whatever means that the forthcoming number from zero to six is a weekday in a spreadsheet, what do I do with it? Is zero Monday, Sunday, or Thursday?

That is, the hard part of developing a standard is not the part about reading and writing text, but the information itself. As for the Weekdays, Microsoft has famously botched this one; scroll down to their zany specification in the blockquote on this OpenOffice-oriented blog¹.

All of which is to say that the development of interesting standards is great, because it will lead to lots of fun Internet appliances where the sender and receiver have both agreed on a set of metadata tags and how to handle data in each given format. But when somebody says “We are using XML, so we’re standards-compliant,” you can safely ignore them—they’re writing data down right but have said nothing about the hard parts of writing a standard.

¹<http://www.robweir.com/blog/2006/10/leap-back.html>