

northbay news

The monthly newsletter of the NorthBay Chapter of the
Society for Technical Communication

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Real-Life XML-Based Documentation

Toby Wraye
NorthBay Chapter

Based in Redwood City, Niku Corporation produces browser-based software to facilitate the internal workings of all kinds of companies. Its software assists the members of organizations in working together through collaboration, scheduling, resource management, project planning, and billing features. All this works in an environment that all computers and platforms can access. Though currently mostly HTML-based, soon the software will be built entirely on XML (Extensible Markup Language).



XML, this is HTML, testing one, two, three. Can someone find XSL? We can't go live without her.

The First XML Context Sensitive Help

Niku Corporation technical writers in Petaluma were given the challenge to create context-sensitive help using XML. An early crude but innovative incarnation premiered in August

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April News

John Dibs
President

www.stc-northbay.org

I am pleased to announce the new ISP for our chapter Web site, sonic.net. We also have our very own chapter URL! Many thanks go to Barbara Herbert, outgoing webmaster Shelley Hoose, and incoming webmaster Trudie Folsom for their work in making this transition happen! The national STC announced it would be discontinuing hosting of chapter Web sites as of April 1, 2001. Not only did we meet the deadline, but we also secured the generous support of sonic.net to host our new Web site.

In addition, you'll notice that new e-mail addresses have been set up for the Webmaster and Membership chairs: webmaster@stc-northbay.org and members@stc-northbay.org, respectively.

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**northbay officers
and committee chairs****president**

john dibs
(707) 792-1791
jdibs@earthlink.net

vice-president

barbara herbert
barbara@sonic.net

first vice-president

(programs)
kurt huget
huget@sonic.net

newsletter

editor: john dibs
publisher: mary flynn (maryflynn@pacbell.net)
newsletter staff:
ken delpit (kdelpit@compuserve.com)
gabrielle de serres (gabrielle.de.serres@usa.alcatel.com)
barbara herbert (barbara@sonic.net)
michael meyer (mmeyer@sonic.net)

web

trudie folsom (webmaster@stc-northbay.org)

membership/telephone tree

will ross (members@stc-northbay.org)

hospitality

michael simoni & gabrielle de serres

treasurer

carolyne gibson

submitting articles and ads

We welcome articles, advertising, and news about meetings, workshops, and courses that pertain to technical communication. Please e-mail simple text to the editor at jdibs@earthlink.net.
Advertising rates (per issue): \$20 for 1/4 page, \$35 for 1/2 page.

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STC Mission Statement

The mission of the Society for Technical Communication is to improve the quality and effectiveness of technical communication for audiences worldwide.

This Month's Meeting

Thursday, April 19, 2001

SoftQuad Presents XMetaL 2.0**An Award Winning XML Content Creation Solution****Presenters: SoftQuad's Professional Service Team**

SoftQuad Software, the co-creator of XML and an internationally recognized developer of XML-enabled technologies, will demonstrate XMetaL, an easy-to-use XML content creation solution.

XMetaL received the prestigious "Best Development Tool" award from PC Magazine, and continues to receive praise like the following:

"Excellent feature set; highly customizable; great documentation; a pleasure to work in. Provides a supportive environment for creating XML, and a fabulous way to make safe and easy front ends for content contributors."

InternetWeek, October 23, 2000

As co-founders of the W3C, OASIS, and XML.org, SoftQuad's world class technical team is at the center of XML developing the standards, technologies, and solutions that will take business into the future. SoftQuad's Professional Services Team members are XML experts and consultants that help SoftQuad customers realize the value of XML for content re-use and exchange by placing the end user's requirements first and designing data models that balance richness with simplicity.

SoftQuad's Professional Services Group will present the following:

- A demonstration of XMetaL's features and benefits
- Critical success factors for end-user adoption
- Designing a data model for richness and simplicity
- Migrating legacy data
- Examples of a successful XML and XMetaL implementations

Meeting Schedule

Location:	Parker Compumotor, 5500 Labath Dr., Rohnert Park	
Time:	5:30 - 6:30	Networking and Refreshments
	6:30 - 8:15	Introductions and Program
	8:15 - 8:30	More Conversation, Idea Swapping

ASI Golden Gate Chapter's 18th Annual Conference

April 28, 2001

Fort Mason, San Francisco

Dedicated Indexing Software and Voice Recognition Software

The American Society of Indexers, Golden Gate Chapter, invites you to attend its full-day program from 8:15 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. on April 28, 2001 at the Firehouse at Fort Mason in San Francisco.

Speakers include Frances Lennie of CINDEX, Gale Rhoades of MACREX, and Kamm Schreiner of SKY Index. Each of these producers of dedicated indexing software will demonstrate in detail the strengths of their programs and what new features they are working on for the future. And each producer will show how voice recognition products work with their indexing programs.

This is an excellent opportunity for professional development, no matter how long or short a time you have been indexing or whether or not you are a freelance indexer or an indexer at a corporation. This conference will expand the horizon for those who already use software for indexing. It will also provide a solid basis of comparison for those intending to purchase and use dedicated indexing software and voice recognition programs.

Registration Deadline:

April 14, 2001.

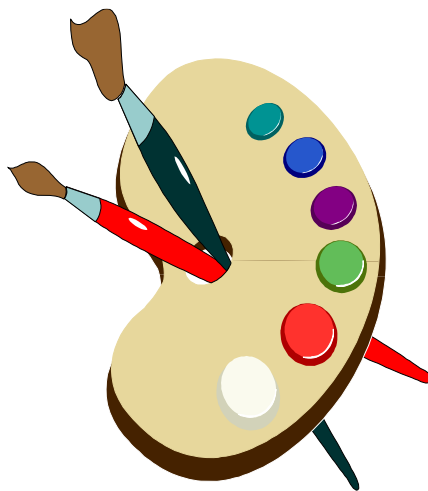
To register, print out the registration form at home.pacbell.net/nansu/asi.htm and send it with your check for \$85 (ASI members) or \$100 (nonmembers), payable to ASI-Golden Gate, to J. Naomi Linzer, Treasurer ASI-GG, POB 1341, Redway, CA 95560. For questions contact Naomi at:

jnlinzer@saber.net, (707) 923-4361, or fax: (360) 838-5600. For registration after April 14, 2001, please contact Naomi to see if there is space; \$10 late registration fee.



North Bay Multimedia Association (NBMA) Call for Entries "Best of the North Bay" Awards

Best of the North Bay, NBMA's annual New Media Exposition and Awards Presentation, seeks out and provides recognition for the most creative innovators in new media in the San Francisco North Bay. The fifth



annual event will be held on June 21, 2001, at the Osher Marin Jewish Community Center in San Rafael, California. Winners will be invited to show their work and receive their awards at the Exposition. Past winners have included Broderbund and Stormfront Studios. All previous winners are showcased on the event Web site. Best of the North Bay celebrates individual and collaborative

efforts in 12 categories for Web site design, CD-ROM and DVD development, digital art, animation, sound and music, and video and film. Each of the 12 categories is separated into professional and students classifications. Projects must have been produced in Marin, Sonoma or Napa counties, or by an NBMA member. Entries must have been completed between May 1, 2000 and April 30, 2001. Final deadline for all entries is April 30, 2001. Full details on entry qualifications and guidelines are available in the "Competition" section of the event Web site, www.nbma.com.



The Kenneth M. Gordon Scholarship

Whitney Parker

Gordon Scholarship Committee Chair

Today's technical communicators have broad knowledge, specialized skills, and high standards of performance. They must know how to gather information about complex technologies, structure it effectively, and present it in a variety of print and online forms.

Practicing any profession requires education and training. In 1991 the Northern California chapters of the Society for Technical Communication (STC) used proceeds from the Northern California Technical Communication Competition (Touchstone) to create the Kenneth M. Gordon Scholarship for students studying in technical communication and related fields.

Scholarship Goals

Our goal is to support worthy students preparing for careers in technical communication. Such careers include technical documentation, graphics, multimedia production, and teaching technical communication. We believe that

Continues on page 5

2000 with Niku Director 5.0, Niku's first XML-based software product. The help topics were created using Allaire's HTML editor, HomeSite. The element structure was invented on the spot and the XSL (Extensible Style Language) was a tedious array of very restrictive "for-each" and "if" statements in multiple tables. Since then the Niku Corporation technical writers have refined their approach.

Single Sourcing

Niku Corporation products out of Redwood City and Chicago were delivering online documentation with FrameMaker files as the single source. The user guides were delivered as online documentation after saving as HTML and using WebWorks Publisher to refine the pages. The user, while working in the various web-based programs, could access the user guides by clicking a help icon. The complete user guide was presented to the user, though not in context. In its next incarnation, Niku Corporation will deliver a single product incorporating all the functionality of its various products.

To say the least, the track record of single-sourcing is not encouraging.

Finally it will deliver XML context-sensitive help with contents and a keyword search feature. Ily, the Niku Corporation writers will single-source the writing.

To say the least, the track record of single-sourcing is not encouraging. A help topic designed to quickly communicate to a user how to maneuver through the current dialog box, view, or page, does not read well as part of a cohesive user guide presentation. Conversely, user guides do not easily lend themselves to cohesive context-sensitive help

topics. Nevertheless, Niku's technical writing staff took up the challenge to produce single-sourced, XML context-sensitive help topics as part of their user guides.

The Problem

Currently FrameMaker does not save very useful XML files. Even FrameMaker+SGML does not provide the tight integration between paragraph styles and element tagging needed to make practical source files for fully-functioning XML help topics. "Fully-



Every problem deserves a bright idea. But will this solution help California's power crisis?

functioning" means that the XML markup can be verified against the DTD (Document Type Definition) or *schema*. (Like a DTD, a schema defines elements and their allowed predecessors, successor, and attributes.) Yet since early implementation of XML help, the Petaluma office of Niku Corporation has adopted DocBook 3.0 as the DTD, and has rewritten Niku Director 5.2 help topics following this standard. They now have a strictly defined set of elements that meet all their publishing needs, along with access to XSL to transform XML help topics to HTML for browser use.

With DocBook as their chosen DTD, the remaining challenge was to single-source the help topics from FrameMaker files. FrameMaker+SGML was used to correctly tag paragraphs, and the

Petaluma office successfully produced help topics using a DocBook 3.0 EDD (Element Definition Document) and FrameMaker+SGML. Still, the process proved too daunting; the writer needed to both apply paragraph tags to everything and master the cumbersome process of applying element tags to paragraphs. Additionally it was determined that the expense of equipping all of Niku Corporation's writers and editors with FrameMaker+SGML and bringing them all up-to-speed with DocBook and the XML process was too great.

The Solution

The final solution utilized FrameMaker's ability to save an XML version of a formatted file. The XML specialist and editor devised a template that includes paragraph tags similar to those needed in the DocBook-compatible help. It was not possible to output XML with sufficient complexity to meet the DocBook DTD demands, since FrameMaker can only output three levels of elements: the root element XML, an element for each paragraph style, and an element for each character style. To make the output meet the DocBook DTD, another writer created a Perl script that replaces some element tags with others and the XML specialist created an xml-to-xml XSL transformation document that reconstructs the FrameMaker output into DocBook-compatible XML.

Calling XML Help

The writers now deliver two files: the help topics in a single XML document and an xml-to-html XSL transformation document. When the user clicks the context-sensitive help button on a page, the program searches through the XML file to find the topic, copies the topic to a new file in memory, parses the file through the xml-to-html XSL, and downloads the help

Continues ↗

page in a new browser window to the user's desktop. Links in the help topic will repeat the process without opening additional browser windows. The user exits help by closing the help window.

*The newest version
of Niku's XML help
will feature a
keyword search and
an automatically
generated table of
contents.*

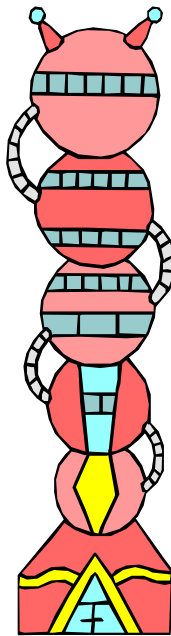
The newest version of XML help will feature a keyword search and an automatically generated table of contents. The table of contents will be created after the FrameMaker output has been processed through the Perl script and during the XSL transformation from FrameMaker XML to DocBook XML. The table of contents will be a list of links to each topic, sorted by role attribute, which corresponds directly to a table of contents heading.

Each topic will also include one or more keyword elements. The program will search through topics given in search criteria entered by the user, identify and create link text to the topics with matching keywords, and present the search results to the user as a list of links. The user can then open each topic at their leisure.

The Future of XML Help

It seems predictable that FrameMaker can make a better marriage between paragraph styles and a DTD or EDD. When it does so, it should be possible for writers to be veiled from the element tagging process. Writers

will then be able to apply paragraph and character styles and simply export their work as XML. The results should be DTD (probably DocBook) or schema compatible. To achieve this solution, however, writers would need to break the bad habits of applying in-line formatting without the use of a character style, and overriding a paragraph's formatting. Such modifications would not make it to the help topic.



In the future, XML will enable us to live in modular help systems.

Then again, some enterprising help program publisher could take up the cause to produce and market the Java and XSL needed to repeat what Niku's programmers have done in presenting a single context-sensitive topic and providing key word searching. Nevertheless, Niku and its North Bay writers have lead the way to what is one of the industry's first implementations of XML context-sensitive help.

*The Petaluma Niku Corporation
writers: Toby Wraye, Senior Technical
Writer and XML/XSL Specialist; Steve
Miller, Editor and Designer; Garrie
Nicoll, Writer and Perl Programmer;
Karen Converse, Writer; Annah
Williams, Manager and Editor.*

Scholarship

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education is an important part of preparing for this profession.

Who Can Apply

Any student enrolled in a technical communication, graphics, or multimedia program at a private or public northern California university or junior college can apply. The applicant must have completed three courses in the program. Applicants must provide references and a portfolio.

Basis for Awards

Our sole criterion is the applicant's potential for becoming a contributing member of the field. Technical communication professionals from each of the Northern California STC chapters review the applications and decide on the awards. Since the scholarship's inception, we have awarded approximately fifteen thousand dollars to worthy students.

Funding

Funding for the scholarship comes from the proceeds of the Touchstone Competition and from direct contributions. We invite corporations and individuals that share our goals to contribute to this scholarship program.

For more information, contact
whitneyP@aol.com.

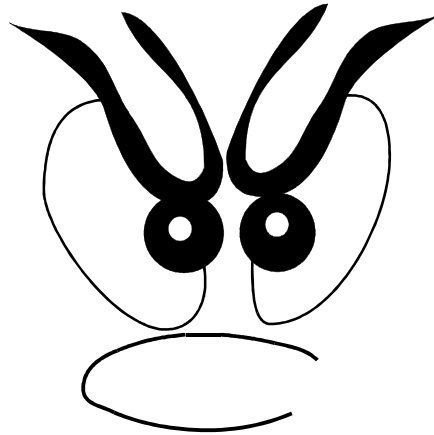


Healthy Computing E-mail Tip 226: Prevent Computer Vision Syndrome

*Erik Peper, Ph.D. and Katherine
Hughes Gibney
Institute for Holistic Healing Studies
and Human Resources*

After working at the computer, are your eyes irritated? If you answered yes, you are not alone. Between 33 to 37 percent of people who work at the computer experience eye irritation. Computer vision syndrome includes symptoms such as itching, burning or dry eyes. These symptoms are often associated with computer work because our blinking rate is about 70% less than when we are relaxed. In addition, when looking straight ahead or upwards at the monitor our eyes tear less, and the corneal surface dries as the humidity in the air is decreased. Look to your health and prevent computer vision syndrome.

*After working at the
computer, are your
eyes irritated? If
you answered yes,
you are not alone.*



I'm totally irritated!

How to Prevent Computer Vision Syndrome

Observe your blinking rate while looking (or is it staring?) at the monitor. Train yourself to gently blink at the end of every paragraph or with every mouse click. Blink at least once or twice a minute. Measure the height of the monitor. The top of the screen should be equal to or lower than the height of your eyebrows. When you look slightly down, your lids will usually sweep down the whole eyeball when you blink. This moistens the cornea instead of only the upper eyeball, which is what occurs when you are looking straight ahead or slightly up. Check the humidity in the room. Often the humidity is less than 20% with air conditioning and heating. Eyes dry out much more quickly when the humidity is low, especially when you wear contacts. Bring moisture to your office with a humidifier or plants. Plants not only increase humidity, they also absorb irritating volatile organic chemicals and encourage relaxation when we look at their green color.



April News

Continued from page 1

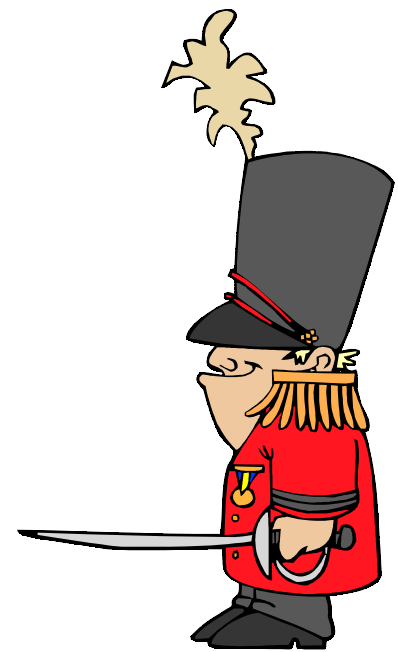
Admittedly, much of the content has not been updated since past chapter president, Michael Meyer, so faithfully kept the site updated. We hope to refurbish the site contents in the near future.

New Officers for 2001/02

Another chapter year is almost finished. Elected at our March meeting, we are fortunate to have a great slate of officers for the 2001/02 year:

President: Kurt Huget
Co-Vice Presidents:
Chris Muntzer and Barbara Herbert
Membership: Will Ross
Treasurer: Liz Kaiser
Hospitality:
Gabrielle de Serres and Kathy Cia
Webmaster: Trudie Folsom
Newsletter Editor: John Dibs

Barbara was not able to be at our March meeting, but agreed to fill a vacancy for vice president. Congratulations and best wishes to each of the new officers!



An officer must prod his or her soldiers into action.

We meet on the third
Thursday of each month

Our May Meeting

**Thursday,
May 17, 2001**

**Topic:
To Be Announced**

Parker Compumotor
5500 Labath Drive
Rohnert Park
stc.org/region8/nbc/www/

