

You know everything there is to know about the HTML 4.01 specification. You've read all of the World Wide Web Consortium, or W3C ([www.w3.org](http://www.w3.org)), documentation on proper markup. You don't use deprecated functions. You're an HTML deity.

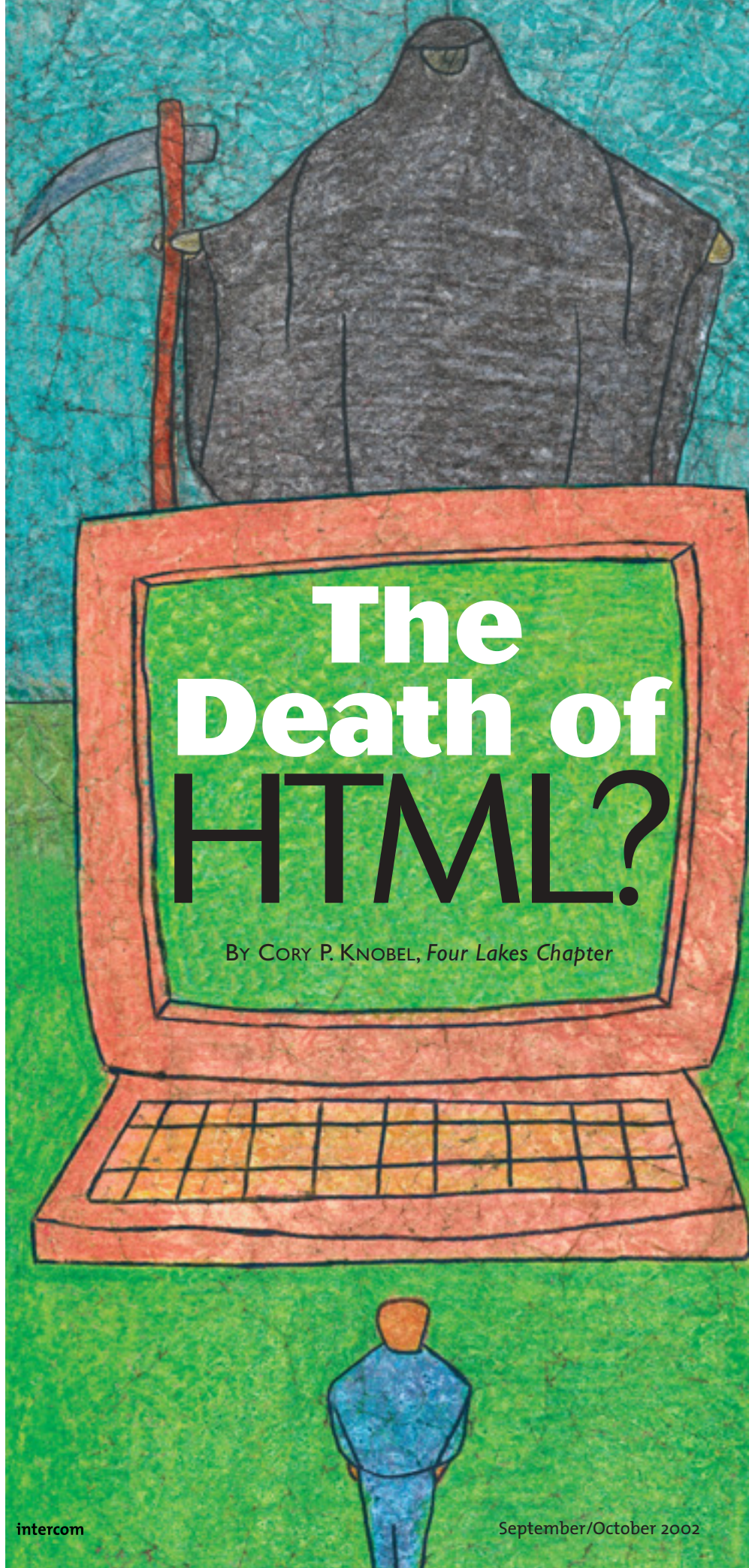
It used to be that the W3C was always coming out with new HTML specifications: more things to remember, fewer tags to use, stricter rules for developing valid code. That's all over now. The W3C has abandoned further development of the HTML specification.

Instead, the W3C will direct its efforts toward development of XHTML, the HTML-like markup language that is derived from the increasingly popular XML Schema. The game of "keep-up" continues—just not with HTML.

While the W3C concentrates on XML, XHTML, and other extensible technologies, the rest of the Web world is investing in a multitude of other tools, such as Java, JavaScript, Flash, and ColdFusion, to deliver the content that users have come to expect—personalized, contextual, appealing, flexible, and fast. Of these, HTML alone has kept the advantage of quickly serving up content that is handled well by browsers. But each new generation of user agents accommodates new technologies with greater speed, soon to match HTML loading times. What does this mean for the future of HTML? How will the technical communication profession adjust to these changes?

### Is HTML Dying Off?

This question was posed to a number of Web designers, technical communicators, and usability practitioners at the 2002 Usability Professionals' Association ([www.upassoc.org](http://www.upassoc.org)) conference. Curiously, the responses did not center on XHTML as a replacement for HTML. Rather, the discussions focused on the position of HTML in the emergence, prevalence, and roles of other, more robust programming environments that technical communicators are increasingly asked to master.



Some believe that the simplicity and limitations of HTML will relegate it to a “training” language. Like Pascal and Fortran, HTML may become the subject of introductory college courses in computer science and technical documentation used by future Web programmers to “get their feet wet.” While HTML may have reached the stability to take this position, that status does not necessarily indicate that HTML is fading into the background. If anything, becoming a foundation language in this venue would represent the canonization of HTML.

So, the simple answer to this question is No. “I think ‘death’ is too harsh a word to use here,” says human-computer interaction specialist and consultant Glenn Fischer. “I’d suggest ‘evolution,’ since that is really what’s happening with HTML. Web technologies only ‘die’ when they are no longer popularly supported.”

HTML is popularly supported, perhaps more than any other Web markup language. Will this remain true? Other technologies, some evolutions of HTML (like XHTML) and others that are unrelated, like active server pages, Java server pages, JavaScript, Java, and PHP (Hypertext Preprocessor), offer increased functionality, capability, flexibility, and options in design of content. Where does this leave HTML? User agents and authoring tools are evolving to keep up with multiple technologies. HTML, once the only option for delivering documentation and information over the Web, is now only one of many choices.

### The Evolution of HTML

Brodie Chree, an independent writer and Web designer near Toronto, Ontario, offers an opinion that is echoed by a number of HTML-experienced communicators. “HTML really isn’t a very good design or layout markup in any reliable capacity, but as far as a document format that’s easy for both a machine to read and a person to write, I’d say it’s unparalleled....I see XHTML less as a replacement and more a logical extension.”

This evolution of technologies and tools for document delivery raises the question, How does HTML fit into this new world? In the current state of Web

content, HTML remains integral in providing structure for the foundations of a Web page, and many other technologies “hang” off an HTML frame. Elements of JavaScript are inserted into code. HTML pages provide access to Java applets. Simple HTML structures will continue to provide an easily accessible framework and structure for documents and information.

Thinking of HTML in terms of evolution seems more correct than predicting its demise. It is possible, perhaps probable, that HTML has evolved to take its rightful place as a mature Web language. Having begun life as a markup language strictly to define the hierarchy of documents, HTML seems to have returned to this function in a novel way—its simplicity of structure enables the robust content created by other technologies.

### How Does This Affect Us?

Though the halt on HTML specification development may signify a number of trends, including HTML’s establishment as a training language as well as a framework language to deliver content from different technologies, the opinions of professionals in the Web design and technical writing field point to the following statements:

1. HTML isn’t going away anytime soon.
2. Technical communicators *need* a solid command of HTML.
3. Being employable requires more than HTML.

Once upon a time, not too long ago, job postings for technical communicators listed HTML as a “plus” skill—one that employers appreciated but did not expect. Shortly thereafter, it fell on the “required” list of skills. Now, it is beginning to disappear from job descriptions altogether. Is this skill no longer necessary? Not at all. It has become a *de facto* assumption that technical writers will have an adequate command of basic Web programming.

The ability to carry out technical writing in various programming environments will be the differentiating factor in securing contracts. Database-driven technologies, specific content manage-

ment systems, Java, and other emerging technologies that were once the domain of developers and hard-core tech folk are now the “plus” and “required” skills for technical communicators. Anthony Hand, president of Boston-based software company FloSpace, says, “In looking for a technical communicator, I need to feel comfortable that they can keep up with the technology that my products and marketing employ. I make interactive software. I need my documentation to reflect that interactivity. HTML alone won’t cut it.”

Clearly, employers are looking for skills that go beyond the simplicity of document markup that HTML handles so efficiently. Interactivity, flexibility, context-driven content, and visually compelling interfaces and delivery of information are becoming the standard. The technologies that deliver this content so effectively may still hang off an HTML framework in the foreseeable future; however, being able to create this framework without providing the robust content and delivery demanded by users will not be enough to sustain most careers in technical communication.

As information, and the documentation of that information, moves into newer formats, how will the technical communication industry keep up? How much will the line between technical communicators and programmers blur? Development skills and documentation skills seem to be steadily converging. Philosophies of documentation may stay solid, but the formats will change. HTML will continue to be an important player in Web development, but adding languages to the toolbox of technical communication beyond HTML, beyond simple markup, is the key to surviving in today’s competitive marketplace. ❶

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