Lecture Notes: The HTML 4 Table Model

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1 Background

Before HTML 4 there was a different table model
It was

- not compatible with US government standards and
- it had virtually no accessibility support

Tables are sometimes used for layout, but CSS is so prevalent now that there is no need for such silliness

- layout-by-tables is very difficult for users who can't see the entire table at once (we are all disabled at some time)
- tables should only be used for tabular data, not presentation

The new model is more complex but it has many advantages:

- more logical markup
- hooks to enable searching and summarization
- support for multi-screen tables

2 Basics

`<table>` A block level element with begin and end tags

2.1 Parts

2.1.1 Minimal

`caption` similar to `title` for entire webpage

`tr` rows

`th` and `td` headings and data

2.1.2 Organizational and Presentational Elements

`thead` and `tfoot` headings (both declared at the top of the table)

`colspan` and `rowspan` attributes

`colgroup` and `col` `colgroup` is a container for `cols`

provide logical structure

can be used for presentation with:

- `rules`
- `width` attribute
- CSS

`align` and `valign`

better to use CSS now

`align` options:

- left, center [sic], right
- justify
- char

`valign` options: top, middle, bottom, baseline

2.2 Markup for Non-Visual Agents

Includes robots, audio browsers, etc.
`summary` attribute
`scope` and `axis`

- `scope` tells user agents which heading a cell relates to (similar to `headers`)
- `axis` help users to understand what a cell in table represents (think of the table as n-dimensional layout ($n \geq 2$) the `axis` is the dimension that the cell is related to

`headers` for headings not in the main columns

3 More

For more details and some examples see the HTML 4.01 standard Raggett et al. [1999].

For CSS hooks into HTML tables see the CSS 2 standard, in particular the box model and tables sections Bos et al. [1998], Lie and Bos [1999].

For some specific advice about how to make tables accessible to the most people (and by extension web robots and other software) see the W3C's Web Accessibility Initiative's recommendations Chisholm et al. [1999b,a].

References

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