# Philosophical Musings on “the XML Fiction”

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In this 1-page article I am not talking about things that can be represented using XML (*e.g.*, XML can be used to represent a battlefield, XML can be used to represent a financial exchange, *etc*.). Rather, I am talking about the XML syntax itself – all those angle brackets and all those rules for constructing so-called well-formed XML documents. I’m asserting that that XML syntax is a fiction.

Look around at nature and you won’t see anything resembling XML there: the sky isn’t XML, the grass isn’t XML, the flowers aren’t XML, the animals and bugs aren’t XML. Look at mathematics and you won’t see anything there that even remotely resembles XML.

Contrast that with other areas of intellectual endeavor: in OO modeling I can create a representation (abstraction) of a real person; in describing movement I can use Newton’s equations to, say, describe the trajectory of a real missile. The XML syntax did not emerge from any real thing nor is it a formalism (notation) of a mathematical system. XML is just something that was made up (“Let’s use angle brackets around names and call these things elements; let’s allow things with the form name=”value” to be incorporated into the elements and call these things attributes, etc.). That is, the XML syntax is total fiction. The XML syntax is not unlike a novel, both are just the result of a bunch of made-up stuff.

That said, once you get a lot of people to buy into a fiction, then the fiction gets a life of its own. For example, after the XML fiction was announced in 1998, people started building parsers for parsing the fiction, people invented a transformation language for processing the fiction, people invented formalisms to express requirements that fiction-instances must conform to, and on and on it went.

I am not saying that XML is the only fiction ever created. In fact, there are lots of fictions. And I’m not saying fictions are bad. Some fictions, such as the “money fiction”, are essential to human civilization. [*Money is, in fact, the most successful story ever invented and told by humans because it is the only story everybody believes,* [Yuval Noah Harari](https://www.ted.com/speakers/yuval_noah_harari).] But I think it is useful to recognize XML for what it is – a fiction.

By the way, I’ve learned a lesson from all this: Want to become rich and/or famous? Then create a fiction, aggressively market it, get a lot of people excited about it so that they build tools which supports your fiction. Then you’ll be rich and/or famous.