

The sky's the limit for admins who know what they're doing.

WordPress Behind the Screen

The web is a dazzling, colorful kaleidoscope of sites and content these days. Yet much of the incredible diversity in the ways those offerings are presented is due to just one publishing platform: **WordPress**.

Started back in 2003, WordPress has become the most **widely-used** single web-publishing program in the world, powering 35% of the web, including **SWCP's own website**. One reason is that the most attractive feature of WordPress is the **incredible variety** of sites and appearances the platform supports.

A WordPress installation can include blogs, photo galleries, forums and comments, shopping carts, even multiple websites and foreign languages all in a single package. Most surprisingly, the overall look can often be radically changed with a simple click.

To do all this, WordPress relies on just a few basic proven web technologies, cleverly working together in specific functional modules that give the platform unmatched flexibility. These are many of the same technologies that make the worldwide web today so very responsive, individualized, and interactive.

WordPress embodies many of the possibilities and challenges facing the net in the 21st century. Blogging with WordPress is probably the easiest way to establish and maintain a lasting presence online entirely on one's own terms. It's a platform that even a newbie can use effectively as soon as its installed.

Back behind the curtain

The first sites on the web were clunky, ugly things as the WorldWide Web was invented by scientists for reporting experimental results online. Interactivity with users required additional software, type options were limited to what was resident on the users' machine, and layouts were quite crude and simple.

The web ran on the early versions of *HyperText Markup Language* (**HTML**). A great leap forward happened once HTML incorporated extremely precise rules for determining the size, look, placement and behavior of every element on a webpage. *Cascading Style Sheets* (**CSS**) are truly revolutionary, for they not only

elegantly control exact appearance, but a few changes can completely transform a page's look.

Another giant step came with the widespread adoption of **PHP** in the 90s. This was a script developed by several German bloggers to run a guestbook on their own website, hence the name, *Personal Home Page*. Unlike HTML, which runs on the user's browser, PHP is hidden in the webpage and runs entirely on the server. It takes data entered from the webpage and uses it to modify the page's HTML display. This is where much of WordPress' interactivity comes from.

The rest is provided by **JavaScript**, another widely-used language resident in the page that produces many special web-browser effects, like when links turn colors as the mouse passes over them and so on. With **MySQL**, a database system to store information, and **Apache servers** to host the program on, that's all that is needed to run any WordPress installation.

The genius of WordPress lies in how it gracefully combines these very different elements. Each webpage is composed of an arrangement of PHP templates that hold its content. There's one for the "header", the top-most part, another for the main content, one for the "footer" at the bottom, plus others for the menus in sidebars as well as for custom content or features.

These are combined as WordPress generates the pages it displays on the fly, section by section, through a circular process called "**the loop**". The loop cycles through the content section of the page each time the user clicks or enters something, changing the information and other content shown as needed.

Features such as these enable WordPress to be a full-powered *Content Management System* (**CMS**), allowing multiple writers and editors to collaborate on creating and modifying content in fixed or customizable formats, and easy access to information with custom category indexing and search functions.

But wait – there's more!

The basic WordPress program – its "bones" as it were – is the same for each and every WordPress site, no matter how unique and different it may look or behave from others. But this does not mean that the platform is frozen. It is constantly evolving. New fea-

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tures, such as the new **Gutenberg** block text editor, are regularly added to broaden its capabilities.

Each WordPress site is wrapped in a **theme**. A theme not only has a “skin” – the visual appearance it lends to the site – but also some muscles, in that each theme comes with its own unique suite of functions that it employs. A photo blog, for instance, will need a different page structure, tags, and so forth than a fashion forum or a tech gadget shopping site.

No two sites need to look alike as there are customizable themes for just about every purpose and format imaginable – with nearly *4,000* **free themes** currently available for downloading through the WordPress site. One could have a new design for their blog every single day and would never, ever have to repeat.

Many themes are designed to look and work equally well on mobile phones and tablets as on desktops. Plus there’s a huge number of well-supported **commercial themes** by hundreds of different publishers.

And if that weren’t enough, there are over *55,000* mostly free **plug-ins**, PHP scripts that can be added to increase or change functions. Many come with **widgets** to customize or add features to the sidebars. These extra goodies can do all kinds of specific tasks from spam blocking to search engine optimization, along with running forums or wikis, importing/exporting content, juggling roles, holding polls, etc.

The reason all this is possible is due to the fact that WordPress is **free and open-source**. No corporate proprietary limits are imposed – anyone who knows how can rewrite the platform’s code to her own desires – and WordPress does its best to **support** such creativity as all the code is freely accessible.

Anyone can write a new or modify an existing theme or plug-in to suit themselves. They can give it away or charge for it. Testing and approval is largely done through ratings and reviews provided by users in the community. This makes it easy to tell how well products are supported by the developers and appreciated by users, and there are also online forums to help with problems, even providing work-arounds.

Each site has an online **dashboard screen** unseen by visitors where the administrator can write posts and pages, change hierarchies, tweak the overall appearance, add features and even download and update plug-ins or themes, deal with comments or spam. The platform itself can be brought up to the latest version by just clicking a button.

Too much of a good thing?

If WordPress has a persistent problem, it would be the embarrassment of riches that having virtually unlimited options can bring. Being able to do almost

anything can be paralyzing to a novice who knows how to do nothing, no matter how easy it all looks.

Though based on simple principles, the platform has become much more complicated over time with various tweaks and changes. Interactions between all the different themes and plug-ins further complicates matters, especially when updating, changing from one theme to another, or moving the site. Plug-ins are available that can hide the site during construction, and test sites can be set up to make sure everything works as intended before going live.

The platform is popular enough to attract spammers and hackers, but components are often not rigorously tested before uploading. These are all reasons to rely on a trusted, experienced host like SWCP. Automatic website backups allowing easy restoration of infected sites are another excellent reason.

Here at SWCP, we are very WordPress savvy. Our **Basic Web-hosting** package is designed to fit the needs of WordPress publishers. We also offer an inexpensive **WordPress update service**, so that we take care of all the major updates (minor security updates are done automatically by WordPress) and monitor the site to ensure continued security and smooth functioning.

Building a WordPress website has never been easier, and it doesn’t have to be done alone. One of the best things about WordPress is its enthusiastic and knowledgeable community, who can really help answer questions about the program.

Events can do much to make newcomers welcome. At our **Ideas and Coffee** coworking space, we hold **regular gatherings** of WordPress users several times a month for both beginners and experts, as well as frequent special events. A new “**Introduction to WordPress**” class is currently under preparation, date and time to be announced. Keep an eye on our Ideas & Coffee **Events calendar** (<https://www.swcp.com/events/>) so you don’t miss this exciting opportunity.

SWCP hosts a number of WordPress websites for only *\$15/month* plus a **Domain Registration**, which start at *\$20/year*. Call us today, and start posting tomorrow.



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