17.8 About this Manual - MediaWiki to Sphinx Migration

MediaWiki to Sphinx Migration

At the end of 2014 we migrated the manual from MediaWiki to Sphinx, which uses the reStructuredText markup language.

This is a somewhat controversial decision, so this sections explains some of the reasons why we felt Sphinx was worth moving to.

We realize that a change in technology alone won't solve all problems, at the end of the day it's really up to us to write a better manual, but there were some issues with `wiki.blender.org` which made it difficult to work with.

Comparisons

Note that these are subjective points, more could be written on this. However for the purpose of maintaining a manual, here are some pros and cons for each system.

MediaWiki

Pros

Online editing
> Only a web browser required.

Quick Feedback
> No need to *generate* docs locally before you can see the change on the web page.

Low *barrier of entry*
> Easy to get involved.

Single Pages
> Each page is an isolated document - this works well for Wikipedia, and Blender developer documents.

Cons

Poor version handling
> With a wiki we can't easily document new features during the development process. The current wiki may include information which is valid for a nightly build, but not the latest stable release.

Low quality *drive-by* edits

many pages would have incomplete edits, incorrect information or too much highly detailed text written on a topic. So while ease of contribution has its benefits, it proved to be problematic too.

Poor Peer Review
It was hard to properly peer review edits, a lot of changes would be made with no feedback. Writers didn't really know if their work was considered good quality or not.

Page Hierarchy
The hierarchy in Blender's wiki was supported with an extension to MediaWiki, but its something that MediaWiki doesn't support, managing this tree online is cumbersome.

No Project Management
Without some project management, its difficult to keep track of who does what, assign tasks, report issues etc.

Sphinx/reStructuredText

Pros

Release With Blender
We can release a version of the manual with each Blender release, make it available online as well as downloadable.

Local Structure
More easily manage the overall structure of the manual, move pages and chapters around as regular files and folders.

Automate Edits

Local files means we can more easily manipulate text, using text editors of choice, search/replace words and generally edit the manual without having to load up a web-page first. (`wiki.blender.org` access is slow in some countries).

Tasks such as running a spell-checker, on the entire manual wasn't really possible with MediaWiki.

Project Management

While this isn't directly a feature of Sphinx, using version-control means we can integrate a project management system (Phabricator in this case).

This means we can have a central place to track issues, set goals for releases and assign tasks.

Cons

No online editing.
This isn't inherently a limitation of reStructuredText, and at some point we may investigate ways to support this.

Must be built
Docs need to be compiled into HTML, which takes time.

Higher *barrier of entry*
Installing SVN and Sphinx isn't so easy depending on your platform and experience.

Barrier of Entry

Increasing the barrier of entry isn't something to be taken lightly, however its our opinion that the trade-off is worthwhile.

The short term benefit of quick & easy editing with the Wiki, has to be weighed against the long term benefits of using a system better suited to collaboratively writing a document.

We've observed the quality of drive-by edits varies a lot, sometimes adding redundant text and even mis-information at times.

Often, low quality content would stay un-edited or incomplete, instead of being improved by others or removed.

Conclusion

Both systems have their strengths and weaknesses, it's yet to be seen if we can effectively maintain a manual with the new system that's been proposed.

But `wiki.blender.org` had some years to create the manual and while some areas were very high quality, it remained a mix of old docs and poor quality content for the most part.