# Section 3 – Development

## Version 1

Version 1 represents the initial work done on this project before I added the project to GitHub. In reality this was more than one version but since it was pre GitHub I have no changelog or history about it. The project was fairly well developed by this point, consisting of 13 pages 3 helper scripts. This version was also using the old front end system, before I moved to bootstrap and the new design. This meant that adding new pages took a lot of time as each element needed its own custom CSS.

This also meant that the website wasn’t responsive. This means that all the styling on the website was designed for one screen size and resolution. Whist it was still useable on some similar or bigger screen resolutions, the overall user experience was pretty poor and the website didn’t look very good. After this release I learnt about bootstrap, a responsive front-end web framework that seemed to provide everything I needed.

Version 1 had quite a bit functionality, although most of the codebase has been re-written in more recent commits as my knowledge and understanding of PHP increased. You could create accounts, log in, ask questions, see questions in a table and view individual questions. Although heavily edited and refactored, all of these files exist in the most recent version to date.

Below is an analysis of the notable code used in version 1:

**account.php:**

First the script specifies the doctype of the page as html, and initiates a new PHP session by calling the session\_start() function. It then includes the connect.php script, which is used in the early versions of the program to connect to the database. Next it creates a new MySQLi connection object called $connection by using the connect() function from connect.php.

The script then checks if a user is logged in or not, by checking the value of the SESSION variable ‘username’. If this variable is not set, then no user is logged in and the script displays a link to the ‘Sign up / Login’ page on the header. If it is then a user is logged and it displays a link to the ‘My account’ page. It then displays the rest of the header links.

The same check is then done again later on in the script, displaying a ‘Log out’ link if a user is logged in or a ‘Sign up / Login’ link if not.

This is the code for a blank template page under the old system, and is used for all pages that were undeveloped.

**admin.php:**

First the script performs a similar check to the username SESSION variable check in the previous script, except on this page the script isn’t just checking that the variable has been set, but comparing the value of the variable to a hardcoded constant. This is to only allow one user with one username to access this page. If this check fails, the page redirects back to the homepage instantly. It does this by calling the built in header() function, using a String consisting of ‘Location:’, and the URL of the homepage at this time.

However, if this check succeeds, the script displays an HTML form where the user can enter an IP address to block. This is a POST form and it redirects to the processipblock.php script when the submitted.

**ask.php:**

This page starts off using the blank page template used by account.php, with additional features like a basic HTML form with inputs for the question title and question body. As with admin.php, this is a POST form, and redirects to processquestion.php.

**downloadquestions.php**:

Possibly the most complex PHP script in the entire project, and one that’s relatively unchanged since its addition in version 1, except for some minor bug fixes, the purpose of this script is to download and filters the questions from the database in accordance with the filters specified by the dropdown on questions.php. These are then outputted in a format readable by a JavaScript script running on questions.php in order to populate the questions table.

This script starts off the same way as all the others in this version, starting a PHP session and including the connect.php script in order to create a connection object. Then, as database connectivity is vital for this script to function, it then checks to see if the connection as established successfully. If this check fails, then the script will exit with an error.

Providing a connection was successfully established to the database, the script gets the type of filter from the URL. The script then prepares a MySQL query for each filter. The ‘top’ and ‘new’ filters are the easiest, as all the filtering and sorting are all done in the MySQL queries as you can sort by columns and order in ascending and descending order.

However, the ‘hot’ filter is much more complicated than the others, and cannot be filtered by a simple MySQL query. It then creates two empty arrays, $scoreArray and $array. Then, it iterates through the $result array. A $points variable is created and set equal to the number of votes question currently being iterated over has (given by $row[“votes”]). A variable called $order is also created. The value of $order is given by (loge(max(abs($points), 1, 10). Then, if the $points variable is bigger than 0, A variable called $sign is created and set to equal 1. If the $points variable is smaller than 0, A variable called $sign is created and set to equal -1. If neither of the two above conditions are met, a variable called $sign is created and set to equal 0.

Then, a variable called $seconds is created and set to the Unix time when the question was asked - the constant 1516221943 (Wednesday, 17 January 2018 20:45:43, the date the system was first implemented). Another variable, $score, is also created, and assigned the value of ($order + $sign \* $seconds / 45000) rounded to 7 decimal places. The rounding is done using the build in method round(). It then pushes $score to the $scoreArray array, and pushes a new array composed of $score, $row[“title”], $row[“id”] and $row[“votes”] to the $array array.

Then, after all the returned questions have been processed, it sorts the array by a user defined order as defined in the sortOrder() function. The function to sort an array by a custom sorting function is provided by the build in method usort().

Then, the contents of $array are outputted in a format that can be read by the scripts running on question.php.

**index.php:**

This is the script for the homepage of the website in version 1. It’s also based off the blank page template, but with a lot of modifications including logging details about the user into the database.

The logging at the top of the script works by collecting the user’s IP Address, the current time and the current date, and inserting them into a ‘visits’ table in the database. The script does not attempt to log anything if it cannot establish a connection to the database in order to prevent errors.

There is also a footer at the bottom of the page which renders status icons for both the website and database, for development purposes.

**logout.php:**

This script logs the user out of the website by wiping the ‘username’ SESSION variable and redirecting the user back to the homepage. This is the simplest script in this version of the project and remains relatively unchanged throughout subsequent versions.

**processipblock.php:**

The process\*.php scripts in this project appear in every single version and are used to process form data and interface with the database.

This script takes the form data from admin.php and uses an INSERT INTO MySQL query to insert the user’s IP address and the date into the database, providing a connection to be established to the database.

**processlogin.php:**

As with processipblock.php, this is a backend script that runs after a specific form has been submitted. This script is runs after a user clicks ‘log in’ and is used to validate their credentials either log them in or produce an error message depending on the username/password combination they enter in the form. These fields are sent as POST data and are received by the script by assigning $username and $password to the value of $\_POST[‘username’] and $\_POST[‘password’] respectively.

As always, first the script checks that it can establish a connection to the database, exiting with an error message if not. Then it gets the username and password that the user entered as described above and creates a new MySQL query to select the ‘id’ and ‘password’ attribute from the ‘users’ table from the record where the ‘username’ attribute matched the username that the user entered on the previous page. It then runs the query and stores the result.

If there is a result from this query, then the username entered must be a valid username stored in the database because the mysqli\_query function returns null if no data is returned. Therefore the script next compares the result returned from the database against null. If the result is not null then the script continues, but if it is then the user doesn’t exist and the script exists with an error message telling the user that their username does not exist.

Providing the username exists, the script then creates an associative array of the data returned from the database. It then uses this array to get the encrypted password hash returned from the database, and uses the build in function ‘password\_verify()’ using the hash returned from the database and the password the user entered as the parameters. If this returns true then the password matches the hash and the login details the user entered are correct. The user can then be logged in and the page redirects back to the homepage.

However if this function returns false then the user entered the wrong password and the script displays an error message and a button to try again.

**processquestion.php:**

This is the backend script that uploads a question to the database. As well as simply adding the question to the database, this script does some minor processing in the form of checking if all the fields contains data (using the same process as described in the above script) and checking if the user has been blocked.

Providing the checks pass without issue, the script uploads the question fields into the database.

**processsignup.php:**

This is the script that is ran from the signup form on signup.php. First it collects all the POST data from the form, then it performs the same series of checks as the scripts above, plus some more specialised checks for its specific purpose. Theses checks involve validating the email address and checking that the username has not already been taken.

Validating the email address is only done primitively at this stage. I use the built in strpos function which is used to return the position of a substring in a String. However, it can be used to return true/false if no comparison operator is used. Therefore I used this function, on the username variable to check if it contained an “@” symbol. This method is improved in later versions because this would validate “@” as a valid email, which it isn’t.

Checking if the username is already taken however, is a more complex task. To do this, I create a MySQL query to select only the username attribute (to save processing time and bandwidth) from the database from whichever record has a username value of the username sent from the signup form. Then I use the built in function mysqli\_num\_rows to get the number of rows returned from the database. If this is less than 1 (0) then the username is unique and the user can be created, However if not then the username has already been used and the script returns and error.

Providing the username is unique, the script create the user by adding a new record to the database with all the data entered in the form. At this stage I haven’t implemented password hashing, so this is less secure. Adding the record to the database is again done with a simple MySQL query.

**qa.php:**

qa.php is the homepage for the questions section of the site – the most important of the three. The page is mostly built from static HTML but when the page loads, it calls on a JavaScript function called Download() with “hot” as the parameter. This function is used to asynchronously download, filter, process and display questions from the database. The parameter specifies which filter to use. I’ll discuss how this function works in the section for filterQuestion.js. On qa.php there is a table with no entries. This is where the downloaded questions appear. The purpose of calling the function as soon as the page has loaded is so that questions can be on the screen before the user changes any filters.

There is a dropdown menu above the table. This is used to filter the questions and whenever a user changes the filter the JavaScript script asynchronously downloads the questions for that filter. This doesn’t require a page reload which gives my website an advantage over websites like StackOverflow and reddit which do require a page reload. I believe that this greatly enhances user experience.

**question.php:**

question.php is the page that displays a question loaded from the database. There are a lot of functions in this script so I moved most of them to an external class called questionFuncs and included them in the top using the PHP ‘include’ statement. This is used provide access to all the functions in the class as if they were declared in the same page, but with the extra benefits of being able to use the functions from any class (by including the class) and keeping the page (made from predominantly HTML) clean.

When the page has loaded, the page calls a JavaScript function called SetHeight(). I’ll talk about how this function works in the section for this page. The purpose of this function is to apply a quick fix for the height of the question vote arrows which were always slightly and inexplicably out of position.

Most of this page is composed of HTML markup for the structure of the page, but the main functionality consists of a PHP function used to download the question from the database based on the URL parameter, and some more PHP used to display the correct colour voting arrows depending on the way the user has (or hasn’t) voted on the specific question.

The function for downloading and outputting the question works by getting the ID of the question from the URL, then querying the database to select all the attributes for the question with that ID. It then outputs the attributes along with some HTML markup and styling.

The function for displaying the different types of voting arrows works by calling on several of the functions stored in questionFuncs.php. First it checks if the user is logged in by checking if the ‘username’ SESSION variable is empty or not.

Assuming the user is logged in, it next uses the UsrVoted function from questionFuncs.php to check if the user has voted on the question or not. This function takes three parameters: the user’s id (from $\_SESSION[“id”]), the question id (from $\_GET[“id”]) and a reference to the MySQL connection. This returns true if the user has voted on the question or false if they haven’t.

If the user has voted on the question, the script next checks which way the user has voted, using thr Upvoted function from questionFuncs.php. This function takes the same three parameters as UsrVoted and returns true if the use has voted the question up, and false if the user has voted the question down. It uses this return value to draw the correct colour arrows.

If the user has not voted on the question, or the user isn’t logged in, the script draws the standard grey arrows used to represent no votes cast.

**questionFuncs.php:**

questionFuncs.php is a script used mainly by question.php in order