

Part 1: Understanding Lenya

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In this first installment in a series of articles on Lenya, we'd like to talk about what Lenya is and what approach it takes in content management, including its advantages and disadvantages.

1. History

Lenya was started by Michael Wechner in early 1999 as a way to document a journal on pattern formation. From there, he co-started a company called [Wyona](http://wyona.com) (<http://wyona.com>) which continued to work on the project until the spring of 2003, where the project was donated to the Apache Software Foundation.

2. Approach to Content Management

Lenya's approach to content management is just that: content management. While [some](http://www.textpattern.com/) (<http://www.textpattern.com/>) CMS's allow users to change the styling of pages in the graphical interface of the application, Lenya does not. Some consider this to be a big negative for Lenya, and for a large institution with multiple designers and CSS developers, it can be. We've been finding, however, as just one user that maintains the look and feel of Hiram's website, this isn't that bad. Instead of working in a webpage to update our CSS, we just upload it to the server.

Of course, this means that the structural markup for the overall page layout is not managed in Lenya either, well, at least not through the graphical user interface. Instead, your page layout is done in XSL files, and when the page is accessed through your web browser, the content and the XSL template merge and get transformed into a valid HTML or XHTML document.

3. The good stuff

What grabbed our attention with Lenya was how it went about presenting your content for editing. When you log in to your website through Lenya, you can click on the navigation in the pages as if you were browsing your website right there. Find something wrong in the text of one page as you browse? Just go to Edit -> WYSIWYG Editor and you're taken to a page where you can change the content. Save your changes, then publish the updated page. It's incredibly easy.

What's also nice is that the foundation of Lenya is built on XML which, of course, is great news for web standards gurus who will only work with XHTML. By default, Lenya uses HTML 4.0, but a quick change in one file will switch all your pages to XHTML Strict. And since it relies on XML, there's no backend database that manages this: it's all flat XML files stored on the server. Don't get this confused, however, with having the ability to connect to a database as you would with any [PHP](http://www.php.net/) (<http://www.php.net/>) -type language, because Lenya can definitely do this as well.

And as any good CMS would, information about the pages, like metadata, amongst other things, can be edited for each page and is kept separate from the content on the page itself. Lenya utilizes the [Dublin Core](http://www.dublincore.org/) (<http://www.dublincore.org/>) for its metadata tags in pages.

4. Some downers

OK, so there are some downers. The terminology takes a bit of getting used to. For example, "assets" are documents, images, or anything you want to link to in the page that isn't text. Some things just don't happen by default in Lenya: they require some extra programming. For example, say you add a new item in your site's navigation, but it doesn't have a page on your website, it just links to an outside site. There's no nice way of doing this in the graphical interface. A login to the server to edit the publication's sitemap will provide this functionality.

Also, Lenya runs on top of [Apache Cocoon](http://cocoon.apache.org/) (<http://cocoon.apache.org/>), which is not the downer, but the time required to learn it makes a lot of people give up quickly. [Pipelines](http://cocoon.apache.org/2.1/userdocs/concepts/index.html#Basic+Mechanisms) (<http://cocoon.apache.org/2.1/userdocs/concepts/index.html#Basic+Mechanisms>.) are the big key to understanding how a page is created in Lenya, and trust me, that will take some getting used to when you want to do something that doesn't fit the general site provided for you as an example. With that, it's much harder to find a company that will host Lenya for you – chances are you'll need to have a server of your own.

One last thing for picky web developers: getting a website to have clean URLs is a bit tricky. Even we have yet to get this working exactly the way we would like it to. And with Lenya and clean URLs comes a much more detailed look into configurations with the Apache web server than you are probably used to, which does take some time.

5. What's next?

So, you read the advantages and disadvantages and you want to take the plunge into Lenya? Good, because in my next article we'll be explaining the methods we took to get Lenya up and running on our RedHat Enterprise Linux server. Don't worry, you won't need this specific operating system to make Lenya work. Lenya can run on pretty much any UNIX/Linux server and (even) Microsoft Windows.