

Merlin Plugin for Wordpress

Incubators:

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Merlin Pilot Group



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Summary and Introduction

During the Merlin Station pilot in late 2010, PBS stations were working to identify the best use of the new Merlin product to surface their local content on PBS.org. One of the primary mechanisms for adding content is via a feed registered in Merlin that will update and display local content added to other areas of a local Web experience, such as a COVE video portal.

Another area of local content identified as particularly relevant to the new PBS.org experience powered by Merlin was local blog content. While encouraging the pilot stations to add this content, it became apparent that automatically updating this content through a registered Merlin feed would be problematic due to incompatible channel elements. This means a manual feed update would be required prior to importing to Merlin.

The pilot stations, noticing the need for a better solution, identified the prevalent use of Wordpress among the group and the system, and began working on a solution.

The result is a Wordpress plugin that will convert the output feed into a Merlin compatible feed for input.

Created by Chris Ege at WTTW, the plugin was tested by fellow Merlin pilot stations KNME, OETA and KQED.

Incubator Comments

From Chris Ege, WTTW:

It was important for us to have a way to load our Wordpress-authored content into Merlin automatically. The Merlin RSS spec differs from standard RSS in a number of ways, so we needed a way to address that. We thought it best to write our solution as a plugin that could be shared with other member stations. As an additional time-saver, we added the ability to automatically generate merlin-spec thumbnails using Wordpress's built-in image processing capabilities.

The feedback from other stations, sent through the Incubation Lab, was instrumental in resolving bugs and adding features.



Download the Plugin

Latest Plugin Release:

<http://www.pbs.org/modules/docs/ilpdc/merlinwp/wordpress-merlin.zip>

(Compatible with Wordpress 2.9.2 and newer)

To Install Plugin: *(Please aware, this plugin is still in development!)*

- Unzip/Install folder in the wp-content/plugins folder
- Login to Wordpress admin
- Activate from the Wordpress plugins panel
- Configure under "merlin options" in settings panel

To Install Merlin Taxonomy: *(optional)*

- Login to Wordpress admin
- Choose import in the tools panel
- Choose Wordpress as the format
- Browse to "Wordpress.category_import.xml" file on your computer and choose "upload file and import"

To Use:

Feed URL to add to Merlin is: (blogurl)/?feed=merlin

Thumbnails:

288x162 thumbnails will be automatically generated using Wordpress's built-in thumbnail feature.

- Upload an image to the media library in Wordpress.
- Once it's uploaded, choose "use as thumbnail"

ChangeLog:

03-07-2011 – Fixed outstanding issue with hardcoded reference to WTTW-specific directory structure

09-03-2010 - Fixed a problem that was causing the plugin to not work for some. Also added proper excerpt lengths and larger thumbnails.

08-31-2010 - Plugin uploaded and version notes posted. Please share any improvements you make.

08-30-2010 - Chris Ege (WTTW, Chicago) has made some progress on the plugin. Link coming soon so other stations can take a look.

08-02-2010 - Plugin development begins.

08-01-2010 - Incubation Lab launched.



Community Discussion

Below is the discussion thread that occurred during the development of the plugin.

1. Chris Ege

Hi incubation lab -

I've made some progress on a Wordpress/merlin plugin, and I thought people might be interested in it. So far it does most of what we need from it - adds some of PBS's new channel and item-level fields, handles thumbnail generation in a semi-automatic way, and reformats category output to match what PBS is expecting.

I sent an example feed to PBS and everything checks out except the excerpt length, which I should have worked out shortly. I'm also working on a better approach to the thumbnails - I had it generating them at 288x162, but now it sounds like it might be better to crop them to 16:9 at the largest possible resolution. Anyway, I'd be glad to share the plugin with other interested stations.

Just let me know if you'd like a copy.

-Chris Ege (WTTW, Chicago)

2. Jonathan Siler

can you post to github or the like so we can take a look at the source?

3. cege@wttw.com

having trouble getting git running on my machine. I'll keep trying (agree that some sort of version control is necessary) but in the interest of just getting the plugin out there, I've uploaded it to the files section of the incubation lab.

4. PBS Incubation Lab

Unfortunately, .zip files are not currently working in Google Groups. Google is currently working on a solution to the problem, but no word yet on when they will once again be available within Groups. Would it be possible to upload the .zip file to another domain or file sharing service (like drop.io, mediafire, or rapidshare) then post the download link here?

Thanks again for your help Chris!

5. cege@wttw.com

well, that's frustrating. especially since it doesn't give any indication that the upload didn't work. anyway, i have it hosted on our own server for now:

<http://www.wttw.com/res/temp/wttw-Wordpress-merlin.zip>

will definitely work on getting it into github, google code, or something similar.

chris

6. cege@wttw.com

I could use a little clarification on the spec, so I can fix a few issues:

1) I have the plugin generating thumbnails to fit the spec. That means 640x320 where available. What I'm trying to work out is what to do when the source image isn't large enough to make a thumb that size. As a tentative solution, I have the plugin generating a 288x162 thumbnail to use as a fall-back. Is that still a size that you plan to use? If you have a list of all the various sizes that will be used across the system, I can have it generate all of them and send the largest available. The ideal would be to generate a 16x9 image at the largest available size, but Wordpress's built-in thumbnail functionality doesn't handle that. I don't think I can easily modify it to do so.

2) I have excerpts generating with a trailing "[...]" at the end. This is native to Wordpress, but I can get rid of it. What will look better on the front-end?

3) In the spec, it appears that the dcterms:valid field uses a different date format from the rest of the date fields (modDate, pubDate, etc). Is that actually the case? Also, the example date given (2010-10-10) is ambiguous, Is that YYYY-DD-MM or YYYY-MM-DD?

7. PBS Incubation Lab

Chris,

1. As long as images are in a 16:9 format, the larger the size the better. 288x161 is the minimum size required for Merlin (and the second largest size the API currently uses), but larger images could be sourced to other applications down the road (i.e. iPad apps, etc).

2. If excerpts lack the trailing "...", will they end awkwardly in mid-sentence? Or is it possible to truncate the excerpts to end at the last period before the character limit? I would try to avoid the [...] if possible, but we can experiment with it on the front-end to see what looks better.

3. We are currently looking into your question about the date field spec. Hopefully I'll be able to post a response soon.

8. cege@wttw.com

Okay - I've uploaded a new version to our server.

I fixed a problem in my code that was probably causing the plugin to not work for anyone who tried it.

Also in the new version - proper excerpt lengths, and larger thumbnails.

It's at the same URL as before: <http://www.wttw.com/res/temp/wttw-Wordpress-merlin.zip>

-Chris

9. PBS Incubation Lab

Thank you, Chris!

If any other stations have feedback about the plugin, please share it here.

10. Jason Skinner

This is great Chris. We've got it installed it KNME and are working with our content to optimize the feed. I'll do some testing and let you know how it works for us. Thanks again.

-Jason

11. colleenKQED

Chris,

I'm hoping to check-in and get an update on when you might be able to modify your plugin so it is compatible with WP 3.0. That's what we're using and right now our Merlin feeds are on hold until we can get your plugin to work. If you don't have the time it may be that our developer can pickup where you left off.

Thanks,
Colleen, KQED

12. cege@wttw.com

Colleen / Kevin -

I recently upgraded our Wordpress installation to 3.01, and the plugin is working fine without any modification. I'm pretty sure KNME is using it on a 3.0 installation as well.

I was trying to troubleshoot with Kevin, and I don't think we figured anything out. I'd be glad to revisit the situation, though.

More Resources

Below are more related resources

Merlin Resource Center – (requires SRC login)

Overviews, FAQs, Video Tutorials

<http://www.pbs.org/remote.control/toolsindex/services/Merlin%20Resource%20Center/index.html>

Wordpress Plugin Resource Center

http://codex.Wordpress.org/Plugin_Resources

WTTW

<http://www.wttw.com/>

Station Products & Innovation

<http://remotecontrol.pbs.org/>

<http://spiblog.pbs.org/p/incubation-lab.html> (Incubation Lab)

PBS

<http://www.pbs.org/>

