My obsession with WordPress

My team received some interesting, thoughtful and detailed feedback this week from one of the computer programmers in one of our sister-teams at USQ. One thread in this missive was to do with the superiority of general purpose content management applications,and Joomla! In particular over mere blogs. Oh, and the email contained the phrase "I don't understand your obsession with WordPress". I wasn't the only recipient, but I thought that now might be a good time to explain **my own** supposed obsession with WordPress, and why, as the head of the team that produces the Integrated Content Environment and is building our repository toolkit The Fascinator I have made sure that our software are able to interoperate with WordPress in particular and blogging software in general.

Actually, I'm not obsessed. I do use WordPress to run this blog[i] and the reason for that is pretty much the same reason we support it and use it at ADFI (for the main blog and for a more technical developers blog). It's one of the most commonly used web publishing applications. And it's big in academia. Our job is to build tools for academics and we use it for the same reason they do. It's like a Commodore or a Falcon or a Camry, well understood by mechanics, cheap, and easy to find spare parts, even if it's not the best bit of engineering or it uses more fuel than we'd like. As with such utilitarian transport WordPress is not the interesting bit, it's where it can take you that counts, and academic users are taking themselves all sorts of places with it.

There has been a lot written on this topic, and I'm not an expert, but my impression is that one reason that blogging has worked well in the academy is that the basic model of blog posts that don't change much is very similar to journal articles. You publish, others comment on or reference what you published. This used to happen at glacier-speed via journal processes and letters and reviews and so on and now it an happens fast, but it's essentially the same kind of discourse as we've had for some centuries.

Why WordPress in particular

One of the main reasons we chose to use and extend WordPress a few years ago is that it has AtomPub support that works. This means that you can post a document, like, say, this one, along with images and maybe other stuff such as alternative renditions, using a standard protocol. Other blogging software we tried a couple of years ago Just Didn't Work. We have a few bugs in our AtomPub support, which we'll look at.

And it's obvious that WordPress is really widely used in academia. Off the top of my head, here are just a few of the many, mostly recent things I know are going on in the crowd that I follow in Google Reader – I didn't subscribe to any of these because of some predilection for WP, I follow this stuff because it's interesting:

- JISC in the UK have funded JISCPress which produced the Digress.it system for turning WordPress into a paragraph-level discussion system. Very important work for public review of all kinds of documents.

- Joss Winn squeezes all sorts of stuff out of WordPress[ii].

- The Code4Lib journal is powered by WordPress.

- Tony Hirst is full of useful tips for using WP. Tony pointed out to me that you can extract the content from a WP page using a single-page feed, making WP blogs ideal for integration with other services.

- Peter Murray-Rust has written about the shortcomings of WordPress as he tries to force it to do data-rich publishing and was trying our ICE templates with it last year.

And:

- When I was looking at referencing systems I was able to make my blog Zotero compatible in three minutes flat.

- Ditto for when I was exploring ORE.

Point is, there are so many plugins that when you need one, someone has usually done it for you.

Look, I don't have stats on this, but it is clear that this is the system to support first. I don't see all this activity around other systems in the stuff I follow, which is biased towards the Open Access Scholarly Publishing and repository communities.

So, we're making a WordPress plugin for our Anotar discussion/annotation system; there's a huge audience who might (a) like to use it to allow paragraph-anchored discussion, and eventually image-region anchored discussion etc and (b) if enough people adopt it, then they might help us build Anotar by extending the Anotar client, which we will be using in other systems as well, such as Moodle.

What's not to like?

To finish up, there **are** some aspects of WordPress that I really, really hate[iii]

- **The key one is this 'river of news' format** which is the default. Go to a default WordPress home page and you get the latest article, and you have to scroll and scroll to see the next article. I reckon that for all but very specialised link blogs or twitter-like blogs this is incredibly poor usability – how am I supposed to know what's actually there?

- **The default search behaviour is the same.** Look at this search on Tony's blog. There's a reason Google doesn't do this. I was trying to find something that I know he wrote about getting the content of a post via an RSS feed but I get an incredibly long page containing several posts.

- The **default theme mangles basic HTML** like bullet points for no apparent reason.

- The **default behaviour of making the title of a post link to the 'permalink' is silly** – I particularly loathe pages that link to themselves (not that I have bothered to change this on my site).

- There's this fundamental **hard-wired distinction between 'posts' and 'pages'**. Ugh. It would be so much nicer if a document was a document, and it had metadata, such as 'document-type' and then you could configure how you wanted things displayed "on the home page give me abstracts of the last 6 posts, most recent first". But then, you know it would be Drupal, not good ole WordPress.

i When PHP was born I hated it, the way it mixed code and output formatting, but you know, modern PHP apps have grown up a lot, and WordPress has a reasonably respectable, if extremely poorly documented, way to write extensions. I avoided using it for years, but it's actually OK, if you don't try to edit using the stupid web-based editor.

iiI am still trying to get over the way he deposited a thesis in ePrints via an RSS feed.

iii I'm not sounding obsessive am I?