

Notes on Using Concrete5 for a Convention Website

Background

When I went to setup the website for the Albuquerque bid for SMOCon 37, which then became the website for SMOFCon 37 after we were awarded the convention after the uncontested bid, I chose Concrete5. This was based primarily on the research I did when I had earlier taken on the job as an initial webmaster and head of IT for a failed Worldcon bid.

During that research, I rejected Wordpress which is commonly used as the content management service (CMS) for convention websites for a handful of reasons, including consequences of its blog engine origins, issues it had at least at that time with reaching mobile devices, and being the most common blog and CMS out there, its notoriety as a regular target for exploits. Similarly, I dismissed Drupal as being too complex and “everything for everyone,” and frankly Joomla wasn’t on my radar. I also looked for something that supported the up and coming HTML5 standard. As a result, I choose Concrete5. So, a couple of years later I stuck with that decision and used Concrete5 for the much longer-term project the SMOFCon 37 website.

A Few Issues

The largest issue I ran into with Concrete5 wasn’t specific to Concrete5, but was a combination of Concrete5, CloudFlare, and how I had the site initially configured with DreamHost, my ISP. This resulted in a situation where CloudFlare’s caching – one of the key features that is gained by having all of the sites I managed, mostly personal blogs and the like, run through CloudFlare – prevented Concrete5 from being able to recognize that someone had logged in to administer the site, including edit content.

For several months, until I contacted DreamHost and had them create an alternate URL that bypassed CloudFlare, this meant that I was the only person who could actually edit the site.

Another, and perhaps more serious, issue is that the rich editing environment provided by Concrete5 suppresses the built-in spelling detection for at least the Safari web browser. As someone with a language related learning disability (dyslexia and probably dysgraphia) I have learned to rely heavily on having my text feature red squiggly underlines when a word is not recognized as part of the American (US) English dictionary. This does not stop me from putting in the wrong, but correctly spelled, word but at least prevents me from doing things like misspelling my hometown on the hotel page. Once I discovered this problem, I did start using other text editors to do major write ups so that I could run text through a spell check before posting.

The final issue I ran into, especially in comparison to other CMS, is that Concrete5 is not as broadly supported. It wasn’t until well after I had installed and gotten my Concrete5 instance up and running that DreamHost added Concrete5 to their list of supported installations that

they can get up and running for a client. Additionally, the number of third-party plug-ins and themes available for Concrete5 is much smaller than for other CMS. This reduces the flexibility and may put a lot more work onto the web team for a convention that wants to use Concrete5, but also wants to have features or a look and feel that is specific and not currently available through the third-party add-ons.

A few very good things

One of the late discoveries about Concrete5 that I found very nice is that it is not only possible to edit content and structure on the site from a mobile device – even my iPhone – but it isn't that difficult. And, it does not require a special app. Because of the HTML5 base for most of the generated HTML, the browser/client flexibility extends beyond the end-user experience into the site maintainer.

One other feature that I found useful was the ability to schedule a page or version of a page to be available for only a limited period of time. I used this so that the page that had the streaming information was only visible during the days of the convention.

In conclusion

Based on my experience, I would definitely recommend that any local or regional convention looking to move to a new CMS for their website consider Concrete5, as long as they are aware of the limitations and issue. I suspect that as HTML5 adoption becomes more and more important, Concrete5 will either become a more popular CMS, or its HTML5 features will be incorporated into the other CMS out there.

For a Worldcon or Worldcon bid, the limitations might be a bit more of a problem. But, if your IT/Web team includes a few people who have both the time and skills to work on PHP, CSS, and other website backend customization, it probably has real benefit there as well.