Patrick Lauke on …

The artisan and the mass-producer

If you design websites, you have the choice of hand-crafting individual pages or using a framework or CMS. **Patrick Lauke** discusses the pros and cons

Creating web pages is no longer the exclusive domain of those who are hardcore enough to hand-code. WYSIWYG editors, blogging tools, content management systems and CSS frameworks have helped lower some of the technological entry barriers. So does this spell the end for the web artisan and traditional online craft?

In my day job, I work as web editor for the University of Salford, managing a small web team that's responsible for the institution's core site. The management of all other sites that make up the salford.ac.uk domain is devolved, with individual web authors in faculties, schools and research institutes looking after their own web presence. The knowledge and skill of these authors can vary, ranging from grizzled techies with a penchant for hand-coding in a text editor to complete novices who have been handed a copy of Dreamweaver.

Over the last few years, we've been looking for a simple CMS to roll out across these sub-sites. This led to interesting discussions with the more technically minded folk, who were bemoaning the fact that they liked to hand-code pages, that they took great pride in the skill and expertise required to craft appropriate markup and style sheets, and that a CMS would take away that level of control.

It's true that building each individual page provides scope for "clever" HTML/CSS constructs, oozing with plus-parfait semantics. When page content is known in advance, an author can optimise and tweak how this content is marked up in fine detail.

However, when moving to a mass-production model, some level of detail needs to be sacrificed. Compared to the elegance of a hand-crafted page, even the output of a standards-compliant CMS can appear crude. Templates need to adapt to a diverse range of content that may not be known in advance, through the use of generic constructs – extra div containers, ready-made style rules tied to class names, placeholder elements, decorative images dropped into the markup as IMG elements, rather than by virtue of CSS trickery. Often, the obscure, seldom-used HTML element that would be just right for a particular piece of content isn't given as an option in the CMS' built-in page editor, forcing authors to opt for something more generic.

Grasping the opportunities

As an accessibility and web standards evangelist, I admit that this prospect seems anathema to the ideology I've been advocating. However, the pragmatist in me is willing to make concessions when it comes to the purity and finesse of markup and styling, if these are outweighed by increased production capacity and faster turnaround times, which ultimately aid in keeping a large content-driven site accurate and up to date.

If a web author's role consisted solely of writing HTML/CSS, I could understand how this "revolution" may threaten their monopoly on web page production. But there's more to creating sites than coding and markup. Rather than taking a Luddite stance and decrying the devaluation of their technical skills, web authors should see content management systems as opportunities. Like CSS frameworks and JavaScript libraries, they're simply tools for enhancing productivity by automating repetitive tasks. The creative act of crafting appropriate templates still requires technical expertise. By not having to constantly focus on the microscopic level, web authors are free to concentrate on information architecture, quality assurance of the content, usability and accessibility.

Even in a content-managed environment, there's still the occasional microsite that calls for a hand-crafted, bespoke development, just as there's still a market for small sites where a CMS would be overkill. But in organisations where "anything to do with the web" is dumped onto the lap of a single individual or small team, any tool which enables us to work smarter, not harder, is welcome. ●

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