Content Management Using PHP-Nuke

by
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Overview

PHP-Nuke is a free web application self-described as a web portal system but it might more accurately be characterised as a content management system. This article discusses what a content management system is and why you might want one, giving examples of current sites that use PHP-Nuke. After reading this article you should be able to decide whether PHP-Nuke suits your needs.

What is PHP-Nuke?

If the average web surfer or even web master for that matter, was to stumble upon the PHP-Nuke website (s)he would probably give it no more than a few seconds attention and then move on to another site. On the home page there is no explanation of what PHP-Nuke is and no "About" link under the menu options. Prominently displayed at the top of the page is a link to the newest version of the software (7.4 at the time of writing). Follow this link and you are asked to pay ten dollars for something you know nothing about. At this point the vast majority of casual surfers would move on to another site. Those who are a little more persistent might find the following, all-encompassing and hence somewhat vague description:

"PHP-Nuke is a Web Portal System, storytelling software, News system, online community or whatever you want to call it."

Not an auspicious beginning, especially for software meant to assist in the development of websites, so let's clarify some of the misconceptions that a quick visit to the PHP-Nuke site might create. Firstly, only the latest version of PHP-Nuke costs money. Earlier versions are available for free and the only sacrifice is a modicum of functionality. Even if you do decide you must have the very latest version you'll want to test drive the free one first. More importantly though – just what is PHP-Nuke? While it certainly can perform all the functions described in the above quotation it might more properly be defined as a content management system.

Among other things, a content management system helps keep a website current by automating the process of updating or changing a site. Content may be added via an easy-to-use, web-based interface rather than by creating a new HTML page off line and then uploading it using FTP. Any casual web surfer may be allowed to add to the site or additions may be restricted to an administrator.

This may sound like an ideal solution for any and every website but you need to consider carefully whether a content management system suits your needs. This can perhaps best be determined by looking at some existing sites that use PHP-Nuke.

Example Sites

The site http://www.flymartonline.com/index.php, is a specialised site aimed at fly fishermen in the American mid-west and is an adjunct to an ecommerce site. This is a fairly typical site in that the menu navigation information is on the right, current articles are in the centre and log in information is on the left. You'll find the PHP-Nuke copyright notice at the bottom of the page. At this site users can add their own fishing stories and read those submitted by others.

Self-Healing at http://www.self-healing.org/ shows a highly customised version of the PHP-Nuke application as used by a non-profit organisation. Registering as a user allows you to post comments and among other things, customise how the site appears. Various related products may be purchased online.

The site http://www.scriptheaven.net/ is devoted to scripts related to Internet Relay Chat (IRC). This site is aimed at a very narrow clientele and retains the basic look and feel of the original PHP-Nuke site. Scripts related to IRC many be downloaded and comments added.

Though these sites share a basic tabular layout showing three columns they have fairly distinctive looks and you might not suspect that they are customised versions of the same software. What all these sites have in common is they allow for a high degree of interaction and serve distinct and specialised online communities.

Some other PHP-Nuke sites that you might want to investigate are:

http://computercops.biz/

http://www.businessnetworkcafe.com

Having looked at these sites you will be aware of some of the many features that PHP-Nuke offers. It allows you to add forum topics, stories, users, messages. You can also add advertising clients, download files and review submissions. All this is achieved by using the scripting language, PHP, in combination with a database.

At this point you probably also want to know a few technical details. PHP-Nuke was designed for a system running Linux, Apache web server with PHP and a MySQL database but it will also work on a Windows platform with a PHP enabled web server, and with a Postgres or an ODBC database. You will need to have version 4.1.0 or higher of PHP installed on your server. The languages supported, with the exclusion of Thai and Turkish, are exclusively European.

Installation

If you've read this far your next question might well be about installing PHP-Nuke. It is a fairly straightforward matter though, again, a quick look at the website is not encouraging. A very thorough "*How To*" is available there but the level of detail is intimidating. For example, there is a discussion of how to change file permissions under Unix/Linux that even includes information about binary numbers.

Likewise there is an extended discussion of the required database tables and how to add them using phpMyAdmin. It is not until you are well into the *How To* that you realize that there is a script to automate the creation of the necessary database.

If fiddling with the database from the MySQL command line does not make you feel comfortable, you can use one of the Web Installers for PHP-Nuke [http://www.nukeresources.com/modules.php?name=Downloads&d_op=search&query=nukes ql] available for your version, in the form of the nukesql.php script. This file will install all required database tables for a fresh installation of PHP-Nuke. It works a[s] follows:

> Simply enter your database login information in config.php (see Section 3.7), upload all PHP-Nuke files (Section 3.2.2), then upload this file to PHP-Nuke's root directory and point your browser to it (e.g. http://yoursite.com/nukesql.php).

While the thoroughness of documentation is admirable, a quick installation guide helps to get a feel for the application and see if it is suitable. Users will happily wade through the details when they've decided in favour of PHP-Nuke. For a quick installation, use the web installer and edit the config.php file as per Section 3.7 of the *How To*.

Follow the instructions given in the quotation above and you can be up and running in no time at all. If you are running a web server and MySQL on your own computer, install a version locally and check out the many features especially those available to the administrator. After becoming familiar with PHP-Nuke the next step you may want to take is to customise the look of your website.

Customisation

The basic look of a PHP-Nuke site can be altered by changing its theme. There are a few different themes available for download at the PHP-Nuke site but many more on external sites. Search the PHP-Nuke site and you will find numerous links to these other sites. Themes can themselves be further customised by following the instructions in chapter 14 of the *How To*.

However, more advanced customisation is not for the faint of heart. Familiarity, at an intermediate level, with PHP, HTML and CSS is required and you will need to spend plenty of time familiarising yourself with the code. It should also be noted that there are over 90 tables in the database so any changes contemplated here will have to be well thought out by someone familiar with relational databases.

Difficulty of customisation is at least in part due to the fact that PHP is a procedural language. With the recent arrival of PHP 5 as a full blown object oriented language we can hope that future versions of PHP-Nuke might be

developed using the object oriented capabilities of the language and in so doing make it easier to customise.

Consider Carefully

If you have an interactive site that serves a specialised online community then using a content management system might well make sense. However this is not a decision you should make lightly.

Consider whether your needs can be met by using a forum rather than PHP-Nuke. While PHP-Nuke can be used as a forum the better choice would be to use software dedicated to this task. There are a number of open-source discussion boards available. You can see Spider July 2004, "On Board: Create Your Own Forum", for a information about the phpBB forum.

If original design is of paramount importance then PHP-Nuke is not for you. Also, if your technical requirements are fairly specialised then perhaps you would be better off developing your own unique solution rather than trying to fit a square peg into a round hole

If you will need to customise PHP-Nuke extensively make sure that you have the expertise required. Your webmaster should be comfortable with all the relevant technologies and should be prepared to spend a fair bit of time familiarising himself with the existing code.

When you do set up your PHP-Nuke site make sure that content changes regularly. Seeing dated material can be a real turn off and achieve the opposite of your desired effect.

Finally, if you are convinced you want a content management system but are looking for something a bit different from PHP-Nuke then check out http://www.hotscripts.com for links to similar applications.

While PHP-Nuke website could be more user friendly and, as with other open-source projects there are deficiencies in documentation, PHP-Nuke is good quality software and you certainly can't quibble about the price.

Resources

http://phpnuke.org/ - The PHP-Nuke site
http://www.nukeresources.com - Installation scripts for PHP-Nuke
http://www.hotscripts.com Scripts of all sorts

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