



BY ADAM HYDE

Web 2.0, Wikis, and Books

Here I go ... promising to write an article about Web 2.0 and not knowing exactly what it is. I think that's the point though, right? Web 2.0 is a perspective, not a specific set of technologies. FLOSS Manuals has its own perspective on Web 2.0. Apart from our inherent cynicism toward keywords, we see Web 2.0 as a topology—a world not of interlinked items but intertwined items. How do we apply this idea to a wiki for a project whose purpose is to creatively and meaningfully bend the paradigm of publishing to simultaneously work online and offline (in book form)? This article will explore this question and explain what we have done to turn the corner from wiki to collaborative publishing platform, through the intermingling of wiki and Web 2.0 ideas.

First a little background: Our aim at FLOSS Manuals has been to create a platform that will enable the collaborative authoring of quality manuals about how to use free and open source software. These manuals are intended to have as many outputs as possible, with the three main outputs being online (HTML), digital-offline (PDF), and material-offline (book). Wikis do not serve this objective well (at least not the standard conception of a wiki).

Wikis evolve largely as unstructured masses of information, in varying stages of completion and with unstructured “contextual” navigation.

Sound like a book? Or a PDF? Not really. So we first had to tame the wiki and structure content into top-down structured indexes. That is what books have; it's what PDFs need, but is it appropriate for the web?

Of course it is! Take the navigation bar from any website and turn it on its side so it appears vertically and you have a website navigation that looks like a book index. KISS.

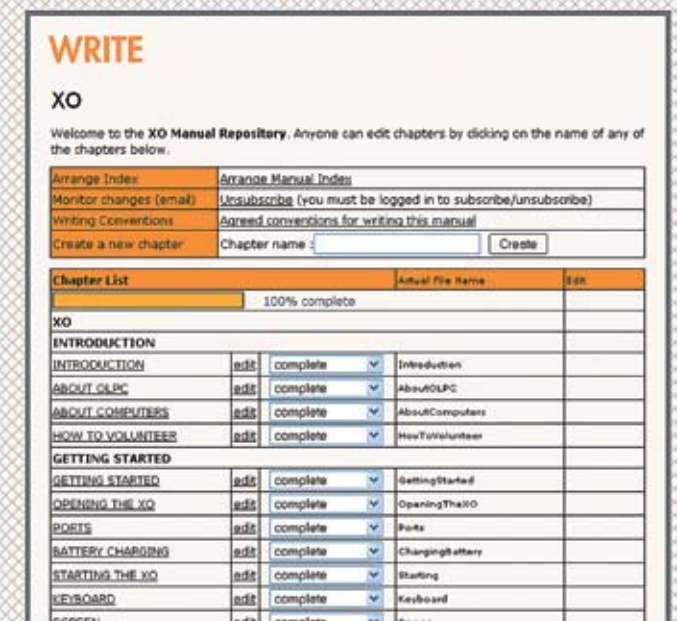
There are certain constraints in writing to this format that relate to content and form which reflect the hybrid output strategy. The most common issue we face with writers is explaining that we intend for content to be remixed, hence chapters must be self-contained. No interlinking within a book, or mentioning

content in other chapters within that book, is allowed. At first, most writers, regardless of whether they have a book or web background, find this an oddity that seems like more of a barrier than it really is. With very little practice, writers adapt to this schema.

So . . . onto the Web 2.0 components: Probably the most visible application of Web 2.0 in FLOSS Manuals is our Remix feature (www.flossmanuals.net/remix). Using this feature, you can take advantage of the self-contained, modular nature of the chapters and create a new manual from any chapter of any other manual. This has been used a lot by workshop leaders, NGOs preparing content for distribution to their constituents, and the One Laptop per Child project for creating a manual to distribute with their laptop. Remixing is a very easy drag-and-drop process. It's all done with JavaScript and no closed technologies, such as Flash. Outputting to PDF and downloadable HTML is also easily managed through this interface. If you choose HTML, it can be with a custom CSS created and previewed in step two of the remix process. Nice, however it's hardly Web 2.0. This comes into play when we look at the third output possibility of remix.

The last output form is the most interesting, and we call it the live manual feature. Live manuals are remixes that you can embed in your own website. You may be familiar with the method for embedding video from YouTube in your own site. It's a simple matter of copying a few lines of HTML and pasting it into your site. With YouTube, the video you chose appears on your website under your domain, but the video itself is being delivered from YouTube's servers, and you inherit all the functionality of the YouTube player. The same is true with our live manuals.

If you copy a few lines of FLOSS HTML into your site, your remix will have the look and feel of your site, and it will also look like the FLOSS HTML is “in your website” while it is actually being delivered from the FLOSS Manuals servers. This means that you have a manual in your web page, but it is maintained by the writers at FLOSS Manuals,



so you always have the most up-to-date information in your manual. In other words, you do not have to do this maintenance yourself (although it's always nice if you contribute!).

This is FLOSS Manuals' idea of Book 2.0: books appearing throughout the web, made of remixed material to suit your specific needs, containing material from one or more sources, hosted where you want them, in your own name space, maintained by a community or communities, and with the look and feel you want.

In this sense, we are not a publisher but a tool chain for the collaborative authoring of content, available for hosting anywhere—on a bookshelf, in a bookshop (online or offline), or in a website.

From the FLOSS Manuals platform, we have created a wonderful tool chain for exporting the structured wiki content to print-ready PDF. It looks beautiful, and the format is controlled via CSS (the native format of web developers), whereas traditional pre-print production tools are in the hands of print designers and not usable by your everyday wiki contributor. The book-formatted PDF is then uploaded to a print-on-demand service and available online to buy.

On this topic, I would like to mention another Web 2.0 feature we have available—the embeddable bookstore. The question that we faced was where would we sell the books on our site? Do we create a new section, a new page, or even a new site to sell our books? In the

end, we decided on none of these. Instead we tweaked some of the existing tools on our print-on-demand service to produce our Bookstore 2.0—a bookstore that anyone can host in their own site to sell our books. We may have an advantage here in that we are encouraging people to host the bookstore in the interests of promoting free and open source software. It is hard, after all, to market this software because it is so intangible. However, it is easier to put books in front of potential software users and sell the book. Books become a marketing avenue for free software, and there are many people out there willing to help us by hosting the bookstore on their site. Our bookshop then becomes viral, interwoven within the fabric of other people's websites, broadening the potential casual traffic to the software via our bookstore.

These are just a few of the features at FLOSS Manuals. It's an evolving toolset, methodology, and social experiment. So far, it's more successful than we expected, but the job is also a lot bigger than we expected. We have plans for the next generation of our platform, and it will contain some great features plus a harmonizing of the interface for even greater ease of use. Web 2.0, Wiki 2.0, Book 2.0, Publisher 2.0? Who cares what you call it, as long as it works. 📖

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