

The Drupal Phenomenon

Call it a Web application platform, a content management system, a blogging engine, a bulletin board system, or a 'community plumbing' framework (as the team loves to call it), there is no denying that Drupal, now in avatar 5.1, is spreading its wings across the Web rather swiftly. We travel down memory lane with its founder and creator Dries Buytaert to the days of drop.org, and travel forth with him through its evolution into the popular Drupal.

“**I**'m 28-years old and live in Belgium. I don't know how old I was when I was first introduced to computers, but the first computer I programmed for was a Commodore 64. My dad bought me three little books that taught kids how to program in BASIC on the C64. I think I must have been eight years old or something, I'm not sure,” recalls Dries Buytaert, the creator of Drupal. This gift turned out to be the

stepping stone that gave this world a high-quality, versatile, free and open source content management system. Drupal is a website development framework that has a 'core plus plug-in modules' structure. So, you can install the core and 'plug in' whatever functionality you want. The Drupal platform is today used for a variety of e-commerce sites, content management systems, workflow management, social networking sites, personal and corporate websites, etc. Drupal, or systems built with Drupal, have been successfully used by many companies, including Forbes and MTV (<http://buytaert.net/tag/drupal-sites/>).

Later in high school, Buytaert studied Latin and mathematics, and remembers saving for a long time to buy an i386. He used to write dBase and Clipper

applications, and obviously an i386 at that time would have been a dream machine. “And to play games of course,” he quips!

In 1996, after completing high school, he moved on to the University of Antwerp to study computer science. That is when he was first introduced to UNIX and Linux, and it was then that he made the switch to Linux. “I haven’t had a Microsoft Windows machine ever since,” he declares proudly.

“I graduated in 2000, and became an embedded software engineer. I was part of a small team working on an embedded Java Virtual Machine (JVM). My task was to implement the java.awt libraries and to write a re-targetable just-in-time compiler that dynamically translated Java byte code to either the i386 or the ARM architecture. We released that JVM as open source software. It was a great piece of technology, but it was only of use to a small number of people so it never really took off. Then again, there are still people using it today, and most of the java.awt code I wrote—and the unit tests that were part of it—lives on as part of the GNU Classpath project,” he recounts about his first role as developer in an open source project. Frankly, a tool written for such a specific purpose might have gone off the shelves and been long forgotten had it been proprietary, but since it was open sourced, it lives on.

In 2003, Buytaert went to the University of Ghent to pursue a PhD and he hopes to graduate by the end of this summer. His doctoral research is on profiling and instrumentation of the JVM. So, when exactly did Drupal happen?

Buytaert’s ‘little’ system grows into drop.org

Buytaert first started working on Drupal in 2000, when he was still at the University of Antwerp. Internet connections being a luxury for students at that time, Buytaert set up a wireless bridge between their student dorms to share his friend

Hans Snijder’s ADSL modem connection among eight students. But they felt it would be even better if there was something like an online common room where they could discuss stuff, leave messages for each other, etc. That triggered the whole sequence of events that led to Drupal.

“I started working on Drupal because we needed an internal message board at our student dorm and because I figured it would be fun and educational. I’ve been creating websites since 1996 when Common Gateway Interface (CGI) and, later, Server Side Includes (SSI) were all the rage. But it is only around 1999 or so that I picked up PHP and discovered that combining it with MySQL was darn handy!” he exclaims.

Circa 2000, Buytaert started exploring things like PHP-Nuke, ThatWare, Slash and Scoop to see how they compared with what he calls his ‘little’ system. He felt he could do a better job than PHP-

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Dries Buytaert

GUP-SHUP TIME

When Dries Buytaert graduated from the University of Antwerp, he and his friends decided to move the internal message board to a Web location. As Buytaert was looking for a suitable domain name, he made a typo while checking to see if the name ‘dorp.org’ was still available. Dorp means ‘village’ in Dutch. The group thought that it was a suitable name for their small community. But well, Buytaert’s typo resulted in it becoming drop.org! And that made all the difference, because subsequently, the name, the logo, everything was linked to the ‘drop’.

The logo was created by Steven Wittens with inputs from other people in the community. “We used the image of a ‘drop’ because the original website was drop.org. The name Drupal, pronounced ‘droo-puhl’, derives from the English pronunciation of the Dutch word ‘druppel’, which means drop,” explains Buytaert.



Group photo at DrupalCon Brussels



The Hungarian Drupal user group

Nuke; so he turned his message board into a truly modular system that was easy to extend. When he graduated from the University of Antwerp, he moved the internal message board to drop.org and kept working on the system.

From drop.org to the open source Drupal

“I became more and more interested in the new Web technologies and started adding features like RSS feeds, blogs, content moderation, user rating, etc. At the time, none of these technologies had reached critical

mass, but slowly drop.org started to attract a crowd of early adopters who, just like me, were interested in the future of the Web,” says Buytaert. “We discussed ideas and I’d implement them on drop.org. At one point I figured that it would be easier to share the code behind drop.org so people could experiment with it themselves, rather than me having to implement their suggestions. Plus, I felt that the software evolved to a point where it might actually be useful for other websites.”

So on January 15, 2001, he created a tarball of the software that

powered drop.org, and made it available as Drupal 1.0. Thus was born the Drupal project.

The original announcement read: “Today, drop.org announces the release of Drupal 1.0 after an extensive period of testing. Drupal is a full-featured content management/discussion engine using Apache/PHP/MySQL and suitable to set up a news-driven community or portal site similar to kuro5hin.org and slashdot.org. Current features include discussion forums, Web-based administration, theme support, an open submission queue, content management, a modularised design, PHP sessions, user management with access control and username/profanity/hostname filters, error logging, a public diary module, an affiliate site module, backend/headline generation (RSS/RDF) and much more.”

No longer a hobby project

At that time, Buytaert was already working as an embedded software engineer. During the day, he would work on an open source Java Virtual Machine, and during the night and weekends, he would work on Drupal. “Open source was all around me, and I liked it that way,” he remarks.

Today, the situation isn’t too different. At the University of Ghent where he pursues a PhD, he works with open source software all day; and at night and during the weekends, he still works on Drupal. “The only difference is that today, things have grown a little out of control. What started as a small hobby project now powers thousands of websites around the world, and hundreds of people contribute to Drupal. Even today, I don’t make any money out of Drupal but it does translate to a sizable amount of work to the point that I basically have two full-time jobs,” he explains.

Clearly, Drupal is no longer the hobby project that it used to be. “I’m only a small part of the Drupal community now, but I’m really proud of what we have accomplished

THE DRUPAL ASSOCIATION

The Drupal Association was called into legal existence last year. While apparently it has no say in either the planning or the development of the Drupal project itself, the aim of the association is to support the project and help it flourish—by managing the funds, marketing and organising events related to the community-driven project.

More at <http://association.drupal.org/>

together. The passion and the determination of the Drupal community are simply amazing,” he says, his tone exuding the same strong community spirit!

A series of unexpected turning points

Asked about what fuelled the swift growth of Drupal, Buytaert states in a practical tone that people start using software because that software is worth using! Especially since the team, as Buytaert confides, has never been good at marketing or branding, nearly all of Drupal’s growth has been organic.

Buytaert contemplates the series of events that boosted the popularity of Drupal: “Now that I think about it, the history of Drupal was an unexpected chain of small but important ‘turning points’. In 2003, Jeremy Andrews converted kerneltrap.org to Drupal and got ‘slashdotted’ on a weekly basis. Drupal had (and still has) a number of interesting features to withstand traffic bursts that made kerneltrap.org survive these. And that drew a handful of talented people to the Drupal project. In 2004, Drupal helped empower Howard Dean’s push for the US presidency. It gave us some unexpected visibility and credibility that certainly helped us grow throughout 2004. In 2005, we had the first real Drupal conference in Antwerp; everyone was surprised when 50 people from all over the world showed up. Early in 2006, the first Drupal book (written by Robert Douglas) was published as a direct result of that meeting in Antwerp. A book certainly helps the new people

on board, and it makes those people take your open source project more seriously.”

And when asked which Drupal releases he considered as landmarks along the journey, bang came the answer: “For me, every Drupal release was a milestone!”

Any business model?

This is the age of ‘business models’—so does Drupal have any? The Drupal project by itself has no business model. It’s entirely not-for-profit and community-driven. But there are people who have built businesses around Drupal consultancy. “Lots of people need a website, and no two websites are identical. Nearly all commercial websites want their own brand and have their own special processes or requirements. As a result, there are hundreds of Drupal consultants and shops providing Drupal-related services: support, development, training... you name it,” explains Buytaert.

He adds: “At the same time, there are thousands of people who work on or work with Drupal as part of their hobby. They use Drupal for their personal website or weblog, they create a website for the band or sports team that they are part of, or something like that.”

Next on Drupal channel

The Drupal community is currently working on Drupal 6, which will have a strong focus on internationalisation. It aims to make it easy to translate both the user interface and the content of a website into one or more languages. Also, for Drupal 6, the community has refactored large parts of its theme system. This will help to make it easier to create

templates, and to customise the look and feel of a website.

“In the long term, we’re focused on eliminating the middlemen. Content management systems have already eliminated the Web master. When was the last time you had to hire a Web master to hand-craft your website or to update the content of your own website? Nowadays, content creators can input, format and publish their own content themselves. The Web master role, as we know it, is dead. Publishing tools and content management systems, like Drupal, have replaced them. Killed by technology, replaced by scripts!” exclaims Buytaert, with the conviction of a man driven by the passion to make the Web an easier place to work in.

Buytaert continues to explain how modern content management systems will soon reduce the need for developers and designers as well: “End user programming empowers individuals, both professionals and amateurs, to take control of the framework and the tools. Note that I don’t think we can eliminate designers and developers 100 per cent. The world will always need developers and designers, but hopefully, we can empower individuals so that they need them a lot less. Much of the tasks that only developers and designers can do will become accessible to regular users. We want to make it easy for people to build complex websites.”

No end-note can do any justice to such a magnificent vision. I’d just like to place it on record that: “Drupal truly rocks!” 

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