

Choosing an open-source CMS, part 2: Why we use Joomla

Two companies decide that Joomla has the feature set and usability they need for their websites.

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February 19, 2013 ([Computerworld](#))

In this, the second installment of our three-part series on finding the best open-source content management system (CMS) for your needs, we asked two organizations that use Joomla to explain why they felt that Joomla was the best choice for them, how the transition went, and whether they're happy with the results.

(To find out why other users chose Drupal or WordPress, be sure to check out [part 1](#) and [part 3](#) of this series.)

Joomla hasn't been around as long as WordPress or Drupal -- the first version debuted in 2005 when it split off from the Mambo open-source community. The Joomla community stakes its claim in the middle ground between its two open-source competitors: the sophisticated but complex Drupal and the more accessible WordPress. It offers an ease of use closer to that of WordPress while delivering some of Drupal's power and flexibility, according to Paul Orwig, president of Open Source Matters, the nonprofit that supports the Joomla open source initiative.

As a result, it has become the second most popular open-source CMS in use today. According to Web technology tracker [W3Techs](#), as of Feb. 1 about 2.7% of all websites use Joomla. This is in comparison to WordPress at 17.4% and Drupal at 2.3%. According to Open Source Matters, as of November 2012, Joomla had been downloaded more than 36 million times, including more than 9.5 million in the previous 12 months -- a 27% increase.

[For in-depth reviews of these three open-source content management systems, see [Site builder shootout: Drupal vs. Joomla vs. WordPress](#). Since that article was written, Joomla was upgraded; for a look at the new version, check out [Joomla 3.0 review: Making way for mobile](#). Looking for development tools? Try [10 Joomla extension modules for easier and better websites](#).]

Joomla's committee-based governance model, born out of a secessionist movement from the Mambo Foundation, includes many passionate, independent thinkers, according to Paul Orwig, president of [Open Source Matters](#). The community has experienced some violent disagreements over direction in the past, and with no benevolent dictator to make the final call, those disagreements have led to delays.

Despite that, the community released Joomla 3.0 last fall and has committed to issuing major updates every 18 months, with interim releases every six months for early adopters and developers. "We have to walk this balance between empowering everyone's ideas and at the end of the day releasing software every six months," Orwig says.

The latest version, Joomla 3.0, supports 68 languages, has more than 10,000 extensions

available and offers state-of-the-art capabilities for developing mobile-friendly websites.

[*\(Story continues on next page.\)*](#)

Joomla: Pros, cons and what's coming

Joomla

Beginnings: Fork of Mambo in 2005

Installed base: 2.7% of installed sites (according to W3Techs)

Pros: Joomla could be a good fit for organizations that don't have a dedicated IT department, according to Paul Orwig, president of Open Source Matters. "It's an easier way for folks who aren't full-time Internet experts to create their own full-featured websites," he says.

Joomla's latest 3.0 release delivers out-of-the-box support for mobile users. While most open-source CMSs support MySQL, Joomla recently added support for PostgreSQL, as well as commercial offerings such as Microsoft SQL Server, Azure cloud services and Oracle. It also supports 68 different languages and offers a choice of 10,000 different extensions -- less than either Drupal or WordPress, but impressive nonetheless.

Cons: Not everything in Joomla is WordPress-easy. While the permissions system, called the access control system, is powerful, it can be cumbersome without some tweaking. Third-party extensions can help with that, Orwig says.

In addition, Joomla's committee-based approach to governance has not always served it well and has at times stalled decision-making. "People involved in Joomla want to have a say in the direction. They are passionate and independent thinkers," Orwig says. But they don't always agree. "In fact, sometimes they violently disagree," he adds.

The community has worked on improving processes and has pulled together around a new release schedule that includes minor releases every six months and a major revision every 18 months to which large production websites can transition.

Finally, Joomla extensions don't always play well together -- something that can happen in other communities as well. "Even though all of the extensions will work perfectly within Joomla, the left hand doesn't always know what the right is doing," Orwig says. For example, a photo gallery extension might not integrate seamlessly with a shopping cart extension.

What's coming: Joomla is now available both as the Joomla CMS and as a general Web development platform called the [Joomla Platform](#). The latter is a PHP framework that lets developers create standalone applications that can run on desktops, tablets, smartphones or in the cloud. While the Joomla Platform and Joomla CMS are separate projects, the Joomla CMS is an application that runs on top of the Joomla Platform.

Joomla 3 introduced a full front end for end users, a new back end for website developers and administrators, and mobile support via an integrated Bootstrap framework.

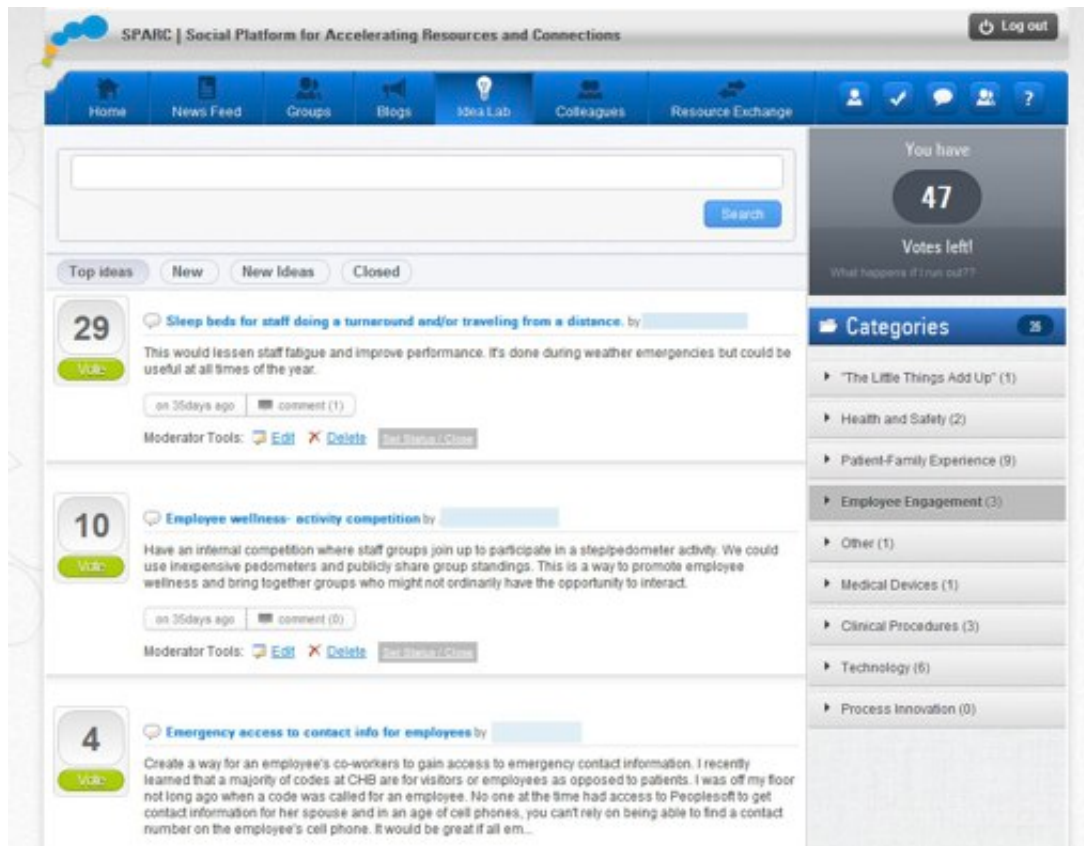
"We also added a new back-end administrator interface," Orwig says, which has created a foundation for the overall user experience. "I expect we will see lots of enhancements and innovation that will continue building on that foundation, including more consistent user interfaces with the thousands of Joomla extensions," he adds.

Orwig says that it's too early to say what will be coming in Joomla 4, but working groups are forming around several initiatives. For example, he says, "We are exploring new ways of organizing and

accessing content and simplifying how extensions are installed."

Boston Children's Hospital enables collaboration

When Boston Children's Hospital wanted to replace its outdated social intranet software, it evaluated proposals to use WordPress and Drupal before finally settling on Joomla as the foundation for the new site. The new social intranet, [Social Platform for Accelerating Resources and Connections](#) (SPARC), began serving more than 2,500 users at the hospital on March 1, 2012.



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SPARC serves as a central interaction point for collaboration and information sharing among the hospital's clinicians, healthcare providers, support staff and researchers, as well as with individuals from outside academic institutions and private industry. "It is a social network for accelerating resources and connections," says Paola Abello, clinical innovation program manager.

SPARC was built using a customized version of the [JomSocial](#) extension for Joomla. It offers a [Facebook](#)-like user interface where members can upload photos and post status updates, and it includes an Idea Lab area where staff can submit ideas that the community can vote up or down. SPARC users can also form public or private groups. One set of groups, called Innovators Communities, serve as meeting places where clinicians, scientists and others can brainstorm, exchange ideas and get feedback.

The hospital's previous social intranet, built using enterprise social software from [Socialtext](#), had

never fully met the organization's needs. So in early 2011, after running a pilot and determining that neither the existing software nor other proprietary social software packages could meet its new budget and functional requirements, the hospital focused in on the open-source Joomla, WordPress and Drupal CMS platforms.

The selection team entertained proposals from three different vendors, one for each platform, and evaluated each against 90 criteria, including the requirement that the system be easy enough for a nontechnical staff person to administer. The Joomla proposal won on the basis of both price and support.

The SPARC intranet needed to be integrated with the hospital's HIPAA-compliant [security](#) and authentication systems -- something that was easily accomplished using existing plug-ins for Joomla 2.5. "We were able to build an enterprise-level social application isolated to meet HIPAA standards," says Jonathan Gafill, head project manager at [CloudAccess.net](#), which built the site.



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Because many users would be accessing the site from mobile devices, the hospital wanted a responsive design, where the pages would render in different layouts depending on screen size. "The doctors had to access schedules and update documents. They had to be able to do all of the things they would normally do on a desktop and do them quickly and easily," Gafill says.

But Joomla didn't support responsive design at the time. So, to accomplish that, CloudAccess' developers created separate views of the site page that were formatted for mobile devices. Users could then use whatever view -- mobile or desktop -- was appropriate for the device they were using at the time. "It was particularly challenging to create separate mobile views for each of the main portions of the application," Gafill says.

Since then, that weakness in the Joomla platform has been addressed. "Now Joomla is capable of mobile responsive layouts out of the box. You can purchase prebuilt templates," he says.

With SPARC, users can create their own public or private groups, each with its own wiki document repository and a blog that others in the broader community can view. For example, members started a Craigslist-style resource exchange where employees can see if anyone has an unneeded printer or wants to carpool.

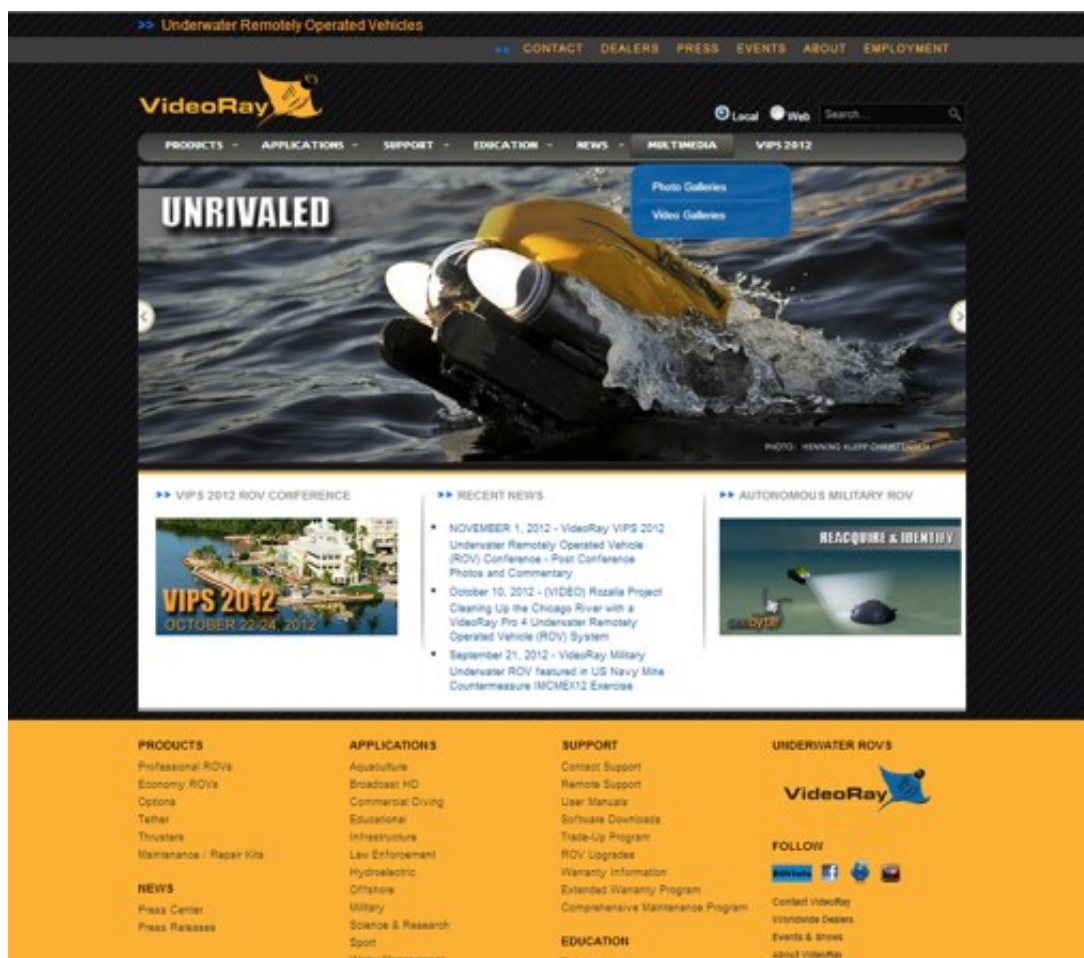
The old system had a document repository and a wiki as well, and had some fairly extensive features that CloudAccess needed to replicate as it imported the data from Socialtext. "We developed a custom component for that and built it into JomSocial," Gafill says.

The project, started in December 2011, wrapped three months later. "That's a pretty small amount of time to develop something with a scope like this," Gafill says. "It gives you an idea of the rapid development and relatively quick time to market that is possible with Joomla."

Joomla's administration tools are easy to use, Gafill says, and that served the hospital well when the site administrator left this fall. Abello, who has no technical background, took over the administration responsibilities on an interim basis. "Learning to administer the SPARC environment with little prior training was pain-free," she says. "The platform is extremely user friendly."

VideoRay manages its product database

[VideoRay](#), a well-known manufacturer of submersible remotely-operated robots, needed a website that could efficiently handle 15 different variations of its products for 12 different applications. VideoRay's products are used by research scientists, law enforcement, the military and other government agencies.



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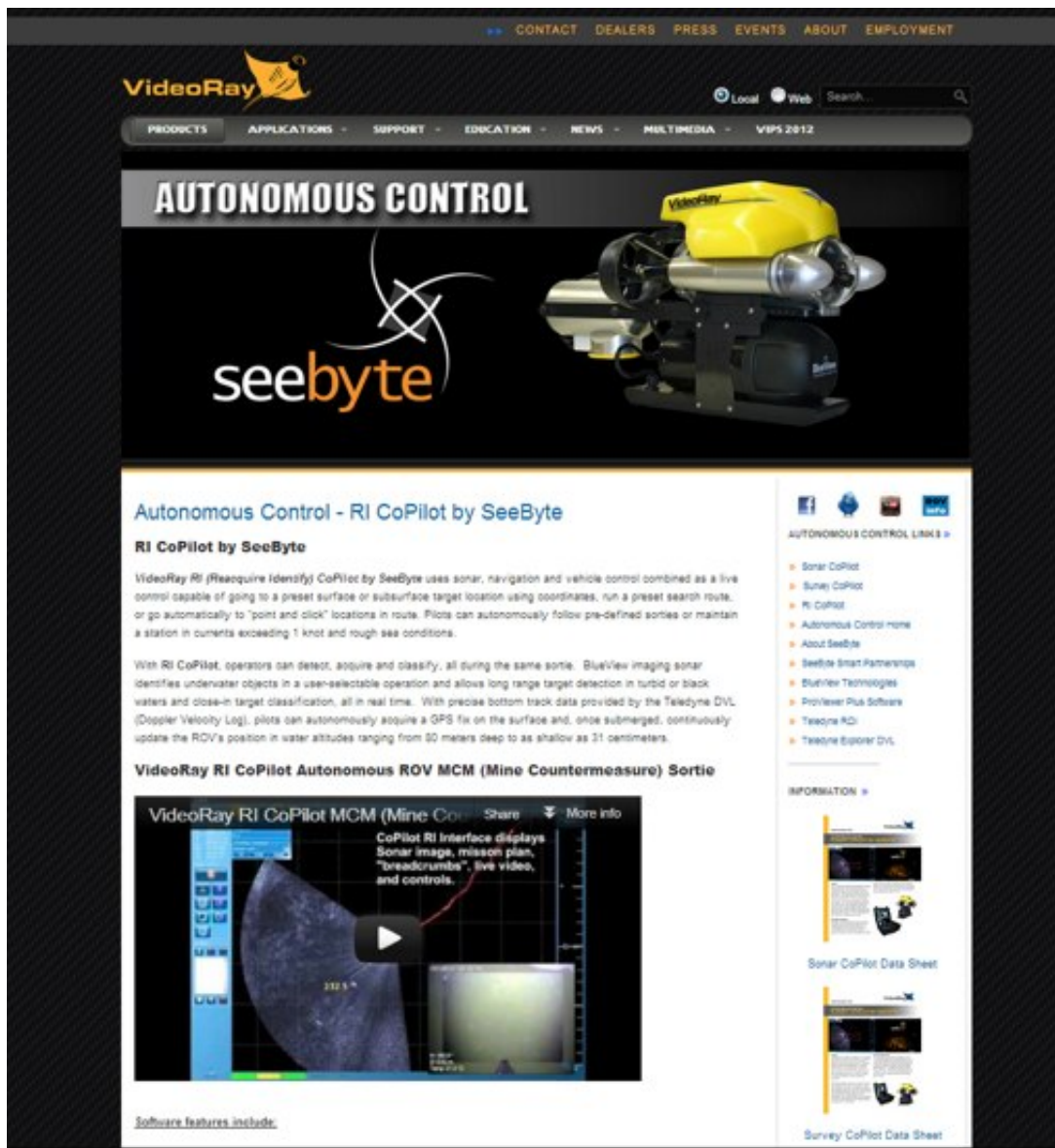
different variations of its products for 12 different applications.

The previous site didn't use a CMS at all. "Managing all of that with HTML pages was a nightmare," says marketing manager Brian Luzzi. Using the open-source Joomla 2.5 CMS to recreate the website took just four months and was "very cost effective," he says.

Luzzi worked out the design using Photoshop layouts -- "I had ten templates I wanted," he says -- and then hired CloudAccess, the same developer that built Boston Children's Hospital's SPARC site, to build the site and integrate modules such as the Joomcart shopping module. The new site, which launched last July, is far easier to use. "I was sick of editing pages in HTML and Dreamweaver. The new back end is really simple," he says.

VideoRay needed a custom component in order to present its products correctly; Joomla has an application framework, separate from the CMS, that lets developers build those, says CloudAccess' Gafill. "Using Joomla we were able to develop this component, this extension, that was instantly usable," he explains. Luzzi now uses it to administer VideoRay products within the site and manage which products are displayed.

Because some of VideoRay's customers do sensitive work, Luzzi also wanted to create an area where users could view password-protected content -- a feature that Joomla supports natively. "Within the first 15 minutes of developing a Joomla site, you can have a login form with password-protected pages," says Gafill. The new feature, Luzzi says, is "one of the coolest things about the website."



VideoRay's new site is much easier for customers to use and navigate than its predecessor.

"We did have some custom components, like our database-driven product configuration, that didn't work out too well," Luzzi says. According to Gafill, that's because VideoRay's products have many sub-products and options that were not easy to integrate into any of the shopping carts available for Joomla. While getting those product configurations into the system wasn't easy, CloudAccess' developers were able to "bend the functionality" to fit VideoRay's needs. "This is why they opted to go a custom-built Joomla site and extension," he says.

Overall, however, Luzzi is pleased with the new site. "In retrospect it was so easy I feel like I could have done it myself."

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