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 Printer-Friendly

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SPS NEWSLETTER NOVEMBER 2004

Welcome to the SPS Newsletter, with news and updates for the ever-growing community of SPS developers.

As always, if you have questions, comments, gripes, or feature requests, or especially if you know of somebody who should be receiving this newsletter, let me know at sps-newsletter@clevernamehere.com.

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v5.0.7 RELEASED

This month sees the release of SPS v5.0.7. For downloads, please visit the SourceForge project page at:

<http://sourceforge.net/projects/spssam/>

PIKA

As SPS has grown, the complexity of a typical site has grown with it. We've received increasing requests for a "site template", a pre-built sample site with a fully-implemented standard set of features.

We've listened. v5.0.7 sees the release of our "site in a box" showcase, Pika.

Pika is meant as a showcase for SPS features; a fully-functioning, fully-configured SPS site; a set of standards for developing SPS sites; and a site template which can serve as a jumping-off point for actual development.

The basic Pika site includes:

- Printer-friendly pages
- Database-driven site map page, dynamic left navbar

- Clean stylesheet-driven templates, with common elements abstracted into include files
- All pages are generated accessible to persons with disabilities (Bobby A-level, WAI Section 508)
- Variable-width or fixed-width page, based on global variable settings
- Tables for local or remote resources (links, media files) which can be placed in nested categories
- Fully configured full-text search, including media files
- Alerts (saved searches)
- Simple WYSIWYG page editor

Over the coming years, Pika will grow in parallel with SPS. As new features get added to SPS, Pika will add those features, serving as both an example of the feature and an informal standard implementation.

Pika is now distributed with SPS; the installation allows you to install SPS alone, or SPS, Pika, and Atlas (our previous sample site).

See the Pika Site at

http://sps.clevernamehere.com/sps_pika/site/

and administrate it at

<http://sps.clevernamehere.com/sps/>

User name: preview

Password: preview

The other new developments described in this issue, the "What's New" and "Global Variables" plugins, are both used by Pika, so see the demo site for examples of the features in action.

Q&A: WHAT'S A PIKA?

Clareann asks: "What's a pika"?

Oddly enough, although it's four letters, pika is not an ETLA. The Canadian Museum of Nature defines Pika (*Ochotona princeps*):

"This stocky, tailless little animal with the Roman nose is about 175 mm long and is found in the mountain regions of western Alberta, British Columbia and the Yukon. Diurnal in its habits, it appears in early morning and disappears into its grass-lined nest, hidden in rock crevices, shortly after sunset.

"The pika spends considerable time sunning itself on a favorite lookout rock, against which its 'salt-and-pepper' coat is difficult to distinguish.

"Remaining active throughout the winter under the snow, the pika subsists on stacks of cured grasses and sedges which it stockpiles during the summer months.

"Preyed upon by eagles, hawks, bears and foxes, its most dangerous foe is the ermine, which is capable of following it into its rocky tunnels."

The SPS sample site, Pika, teaches about and advocates on behalf of this neglected mammal.

Q&A: DEVELOPMENT FROM PIKA

Lynn asks: "We're starting the process of developing a site, and would like to use Pika as a jumping-off point, since it includes many of the features we hope to use in our own site. What graphic design limitations does this approach impose?"

Lynn, the short answer is that Pika imposes no design limitations whatsoever -- but the more you diverge from Pika's design, the more work you will have to do, and the less easy it will be to take advantage of future SPS features implemented within Pika.

Specifically, the Pika templates assume that pages are divided into four regions: banner, left navbar, footer, and page body. The page body can be further subdivided into a main area and a right third column.

The dimensions of the various regions, and whether the page as a whole is fixed-width or variable-width, can be trivially changed, as can the contents of most of the regions. In addition, all formatting is controlled by CSS stylesheets, so colors, fonts, and sizes are very easy to modify. (Though if you start with the set of style `_names_` specified in the Pika stylesheets, you won't have to re-code all the default templates to use your own style names.)

In general, if you want to make heavy use of Pika, you should start your design process by looking at the canonical, basic Pika site,

http://sps.clevernamehere.com/sps_pika/

The more the page layout of your site diverges from this, the more work will be required to implement your own site.

This should not dissuade you from designing your site however you like! Pika is a jumping-off point, not a straightjacket. One of the powers of SPS is that it can be used to develop very different sites (as we've seen in the Featured Sites over the years). Pika is nothing more than a good place to start.

NEW FEATURE: "WHAT'S NEW" PLUGIN MODULE

So you're trucking along building your SPS-managed site. First you create a table for Publications, and all is well. Then you create a new table for Press Releases, and all is well. The organization also has a set of special features, so you create a Special Features table, and everybody's very happy.

And then you decide that you want a "What's New" box on the home page, and you want to list new Publications, Press Releases, and Special Features, all in one list, mixed together and sorted by date, rather than broken out by type.

What to do? A single SQL query can't handle this, of course, since you want records from multiple tables.

The solution? The new "What's New" plugin generator module, which lets you query multiple tables and provide the results, all sorted together, in a single loop variable. Full documentation, including a long example, is in the manual, at

<http://sps.clevernamehere.com/sps/manual/plugin/whatsNew.html>

The feature is also implemented

NEW FEATURE: GLOBAL VARIABLES, CGI OUTPUT FILTER

(This is actually two features, but they go together like vodka and pickles.)

When building SPS-powered sites, we've sometimes found the need for truly global variables -- variables which can be managed from within the administrative interface, but are then visible on every page on the site, however it's generated.

This first occurred to us early this year, when we had to update the copyright line for every site we manage. It was a simple update, since we'd built it into an include file, but it still would have been preferable if the line could have been stored in a variable. Similarly, there are always tokens like the main contact phone number which appear in various places, and which change just frequently enough to be a nightmare.

The new Global Variables plugin is a solution. On the administrative side, it's a very simple table of names and values, easily updated through the main SPS administrative interface. On the output side, an output filter makes all the variables available to every template; just put the output filter into the main generator bundle.

But wait, you say -- what about the output of the various applications? How will the variables be available to the send-to-a-friend application, the search results template, the mailing list interface?

The answer is the new flag, `APPLY_TO_CGI`, available to generator bundles. Put this flag into your main bundle, and all the output filters configured there will also be applied to the output of every public application.

(Users of the `sps::plugin::sitemap` should note that the `APPLY_TO_CGI`

flag means that the sitemap is also available to CGIs, so it's no longer necessary to generate e.g. a left navbar include file.)

FEATURED SITE: HOTEL WORKERS RIGHTS

This month's featured site is HotelWorkersRights.org.

HWR is a project of UNITE HERE, the new union created from the merger of U.N.I.T.E. and H.E.R.E. The purpose of the HWR project is to provide resources to help hotel workers learn about and act in support of their rights:

- to a safe workplace
- to be paid what they've earned
- and to be free from discrimination.

This is a largely static site, but SPS was used in support of various features. In addition to the printer-friendly pages, mailing lists, send-to-a-friend feature, and other standard SPS tools, we developed a custom database for storing state-by-state hotel worker wage laws: minimum wage standards, overtime requirements, bathroom break and meal break requirements, etc.

The site is international and multilingual. Since the audience includes Canadian and U.S. workers, the site needs to manage and store information for both audiences. In addition, we needed to develop the site in both English and Spanish. A customized version of the sitemap plugin, with fields for both the English and Spanish section names, made it easy to keep the two versions consistent.

The HWR site can be found at

<http://www.hotelworkersrights.org>

Development for HWR was donated by Clever Name Here Inc. and Lonny Offen.

DOWNLOAD SPS

The latest version of SPS (currently 5.0.7) is always available for download from the SourceForge page at

<http://www.sourceforge.net/projects/spssam/>

The SPS manual is distributed with the software, or can be viewed at

<http://sps.clevernamehere.com/sps/manual>

An online demo of SPS is available at

<http://sps.clevernamehere.com/sps/>
(user name "preview" password "preview")

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<http://sps.clevernamehere.com/sps/manual/license.html>

The SPS Newsletter is a monthly update of news and events of interest to the SPS user community. To subscribe or unsubscribe, send your requests to the list administrator at sps-newsletter@clevernamehere.com.

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