

A Brief History Of Django

Frank Wiles - REVSYS

To quote the recently deceased James Earl Jones' Oscar acceptance speech:

Ladies and Gentlemen I stand before you deeply honored, mighty grateful and just plain gobsmacked!

Do you realize how unlikely it is we are all gathered here today?

Well...let me tell you a little bit of how it happened...

Our story begins in 1891 when Wilford Collins Simons took over the Lawrence Record. Thus beginning the 125 year ownership of the newspaper by the Simons' family, who finally sold the newspaper in 2016.

This is actually a 2013 reproduction on the 150th anniversary of Quantrill's Raid of Lawrence, Kansas. As evidenced by the bar code in the upper

right hand corner. Bar codes wouldn't be invented for another 89 years... but anyway

Wait, I thought you said BRIEF?

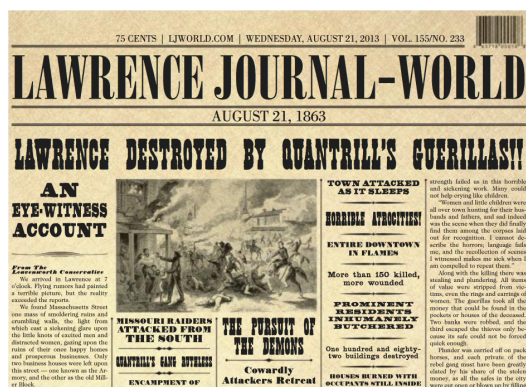
Don't be scared that I'm starting us off 133 years ago! We're going to quickly jump forward to the 1970s.

Lawrence is the small hippie liberal bastion of Kansas and...

During the Vietnam Era student protestors set fire to the Kansas Union building and set off a bomb in the computer center. Why is this important? Well it's a computer lab first of all, but really it's because the day the bomb went off was the second day of employment of a man named Ralph Gage at the Journal-World, he'll become super important to our story in a bit.

Oh and I love the caption here "Mangled Paper Boxes May Have Saved Lives"

which begs the question, maybe we should reconsider punch cards???



Sunflower CableVision

1972

The Simons grew their media empire in 1972 by launching Sunflower CableVision an early cable TV provider. Sunflower went on to be the first system west of the Mississippi River to have HBO and the second city in the US to have cable modems. Named Independent Operator of the Year in 2003 we helped craft the Video On Demand specs and were the first beta testers (and first to use in production) the DOCSIS cable modem standard you all enjoy today.

We also had "Geeks On Wheels" an on-demand at home computer service and repair business years before Best Buy's Geek Squad.

The Lawrence Journal-World was also one of the first 50 newspapers to go online in the US.

... Get to the point Frank

I'm giving you all of this backstory to help set the stage for how this small newspaper in Kansas ended up building and then releasing a little web framework we've all grown to love named Django.

Let's flash forward a little bit more...

```
commit d6ded0e91bcdd2a8f7a221f6a5552a33fe545359
Author: Jacob Kaplan-Moss <jacob@jacobian.org>
Date: Wed Jul 13 16:56:05 2005 +0000

    Created basic repository structure
```

Their new creation was called "The CMS"



So this is a bit of a lie as Django actually started a couple of years before in 2003 when Adrian and Simon started working on a Python based replacement for a Perl CMS I had helped build.

This photo is from 1911, it's the old Post Office for Lawrence, Kansas which was acquired by the World Company and turned into the "converged" newsrooms which housed the newspaper staff, 6 News TV staff and World Online which is where Adrian, Simon and Jacob worked.

If you look here on the bottom left, just in front of the horse you'll barely see the top of a basement window.

Here let me help you out a bit.

That's where Django was born.

Incidentally this is directly across the street from the coffee shop Jeff Triplett and I go to basically everyday.



Let's go backwards JUST a bit and dig more deeply into the details around the very early years of Django before it was released.

2003 - 2004

Adrian, Simon and Jacob

So due to a bunch of not very interesting reorganizations and staff departures there was about a 6 month period of time where I was essentially the only geek at the World Company. Having to push the cable ISP forward all while keeping the lights on for World Online.

Luckily I was 20 years younger as the lack of sleep might *actually* kill me now. I mentioned it briefly before but Java Break the coffeeshop across the street, which was open 24 hours a day, certainly had a minor role in the technological success of The World Company during this time period.

Thankfully for me and Django's history Adrian Holovaty came along and took over World Online. He then hired Simon to assist. Simon was able to come to the US on a student work visa for a year internship. Simon's help went so well Jacob was brought in to replace him, but they overlapped a few months.

Together they replaced our old Perl CMS and a couple of PHP sites they had built with a new Python based system we mentioned earlier simply named "The CMS".

Django was extracted from "The CMS" much like how Rails was extracted from the product Basecamp.

2005

Ok we're back to 2005 the official year of Django's "birth". 2005 is probably a fuzzy childhood memory for some of you so let me set some context to this time period:

- Yahoo was much bigger than Google
- MySpace was the dominant social network
- AOL was still a thing
- The iPhone wouldn't be released for 2 more years
- Slashdot was the main source for tech news. HackerNews for example would not launch for another 2 years
- git was released 3 months before Django, we all still used Subversion
- it was the time of Python 2.4

- PostgreSQL version 8 was out, but most everyone used MySQL
- The PSF was 4 years old
- PyCon that year was about 450 people
- Gmail came out the year before
- Most of the web ran on Perl
- Javascript frameworks DIDN'T EVEN EXIST!

The Ellington in the Room

After several failed naming attempts they named what they extracted Django because of Adrian's love of jazz.

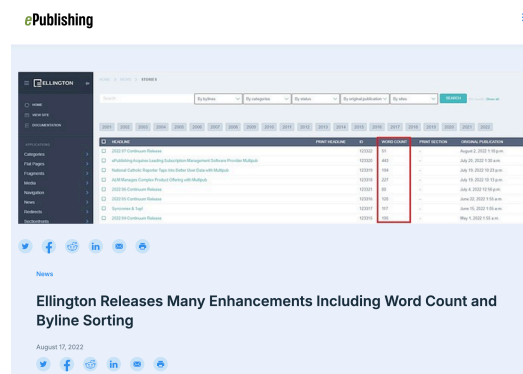
After Django was extracted from "The CMS" the left over bits needed a name. It was eventually named Ellington after Duke Ellington.

During this time the World Company realized they had a state of the art CMS on their hands and wanted to sell it to other newspapers.

To make some extra revenue, sure, but there was absolutely a deep desire from the Simons' family on down to improve, grow, and as time went on attempt to save journalism. It was obvious to us that newspapers needed to make the transition to being somewhat online if not *primarily* online in the coming years.

While they were also a small regional paper, they had big impact in the journalism world. Dolph Simons, Jr. served as a director of the Associated Press for a decade, a juror for the Pulitzer Prize, and held director positions at many lesser known organizations like the Kansas Press Association. Both Dolph and Ralph Gage were life-time trustees of the William Allen White Foundation whose mission is to strengthen freedom of speech, press and communication.

Ellington still exists by the way. It was later acquired by ePublishing and is still in active use today. If you squint you may notice some deep similarities to the Django Admin...



To Open Source or Not

Around this time Adrian and Jacob got the bright idea to Open Source Django because Rails had been released and the buzz at PyCon was all about what would Python's answer to Rails be?

The World Company had a long history of USING Open Source. Their previous CMS was written in Perl after all and the cable ISP simply would not have been possible or profitable if we had stayed with commercial Unix.

The problem was it was scary for businesses to Open Source software at the time. It wasn't exactly RARE, but it was not at all common. They didn't understand the technology at ALL and the legal standing of the various licenses were weird and somewhat untested.

It's hard to get 100 year old companies to do scary things they don't understand.

So Adrian and Jacob asked me if I would come help argue in defense of Open Sourcing Django. As a long time Open Source user and contributor I was happy to, but you have to realize at this point I didn't use Django or even Python. I was still a die hard fan of Perl.

But I had a stronger relationship with the Simons and I was fluent in lawyer and suit speak.

The Lawyer Meeting

The exact date is lost to history. I seem to remember it being a Thursday morning. I was probably a little hung over.

For me it was just another meeting in my otherwise crazy week jumping between newspaper problems, to cable problems, to satellite problems to ISP problems.

I had no idea it was a pivotal moment in MY career and certainly not in YOUR careers!

Here we reintroduce that reporter from the 1970 bombing of the computer center, Ralph Gage.

Ralph Gage

1941 - 2022

Ralph started off as a reporter just before that bombing and worked his way up to Editor and eventually CEO of the entire World Company.

He was the best / worst boss I ever had. Ralph often said that Tim O'Brien of The New York Times might have written his epitaph writing:

"a no-nonsense taskmaster...deputized to make sure the company's trains ran on time."

I can still hear his gravelly voice calling me on the phone to say "Goddammit Frank..." whenever a website or his email wasn't working correctly.

If Adrian, Simon and Jacob are Django's parents. Ralph is it's grandpa.

The Concerns

The main legal concern Ralph and the Simons' Family had was would Open Sourcing Django blow back on the company in some way?

Would some future legal determination of the license force them to Open Source Ellington? If Django wasn't well received or successful would it somehow tarnish the World Company's journalism standing and credibility?

And they just fundamentally didn't understand Open Source and how "Django" was separate from Ellington. I helped explain that while they had built an amazing house they were selling, Django wasn't the house. That at the time most people built houses with hand saws and hammers. We were giving away the improved circular saws, nail guns and other bits, not the house itself.

We also argued that if Django were successful they would reap the benefits of free external contributions. Which I'm happy to say materialized almost immediately.

Another argument that was made was that the company had long reaped the benefits of Open Source and this was a way to give back to the wider community with little risk or cost.

Thankfully these all resonated with Ralph. But Jacob reminded me this week that Ralph had specifically said that while they didn't really understand it, we had always steered them right in terms of technology, that they trusted us, and trusted this was best for the company.

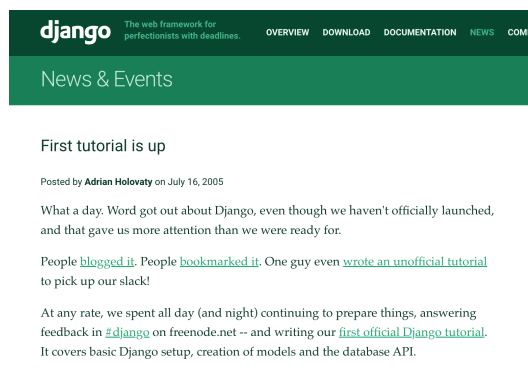
BSD License

Weirdly enough the bulk of the meeting was not spent on whether to Open Source it or not, but was spent arguing between the GPL and the BSD licenses.

At the time the GPL didn't have a lot of legal precedent and the BSD had been held up in court. It was also less scary language without the "viral" nature of the GPL.

Which is why we landed there.

As you all know they approved the plan and Django was released soon after.



To say Django was well received is a bit of an understatement. The community couldn't even wait for the official announcement!

Adrian soft launched it by giving a presentation at Chipify and someone named Hugo actually got a full sqlite implementation contributed BEFORE the actual launch date.

Other Decisions and Stories

Designers and Templates

If Django had a cheat code to its success it may very well have been the web designers involved early in the project.

People like Wilson Minor who went on to do little things like redesign Apple's website and Rdio and Everyblock and then a senior designer at Facebook. And Nathan Borror who came after him but ALSO went on to be a senior designer at Facebook.

While the templates were inspired by the Smarty templates which had template inheritance but the reason templates don't error when you try to use a value that doesn't exist is practical when you don't want to take down a news site with a simple template typo.

They helped ensure the admin had a nice UI to use and that we had a slick looking website. Their influence, along with the designers to come, helped shape our style both in and outside the code and features.

Speaking of the admin...

The Django Admin

The Django Admin, which is mostly made possible because of the tight integration of the ORM is, in my opinion, the main reason Django has been successful. It was an early feature and is still one of the major selling points and important to our history.

The Documentation

Adrian had a journalism background, Jacob's degree is in literature, and as well all know Simon is a prolific author on his blog, but Jacob tells me a strong influence for the depth and quality of the docs are due to Karl Fogel's "Producing Open Source Software".

Caching Framework

Some features came about out of necessity. Journal World websites were kind of popular and with all the traffic things would get slow. Remember the only clouds we had back then sometimes had tornados in them.

The team at this point didn't really have a lot of ops experience and Adrian reached out to see if I had any ideas about what they could do. "Have you guys heard of memcached?"

And the caching framework was born...

It had only come out a year or so before so it wasn't exactly a surprise they hadn't heard about it yet.

PostgreSQL vs MySQL

So why does Django have a slight preference for PostgreSQL? I was and remain a huge fan of PostgreSQL, but you have to realize at this point in history EVERYONE was using MySQL. If you weren't using a commercial database 90+% change you were using MySQL.

This was around MySQL version 3 FYI and sadly at that point in time it had a bad habit of corrupting it's tables seemingly randomly and you'd lose data.

PostgreSQL on the other hand was a bit slower, but was rock solid. Finally after one too many times of having an outage and losing some data Adrian asked what would be involved in switching the World Company sites over... and the rest as they say is history.

June 2008

Django Software Foundation

In another forward looking decision by Ralph and the Simons, they agreed to put all of Django's intellectual property into a non-profit named the Django Software Foundation.

This was good for a variety of reasons but helped Django's adoption among competitive newspaper companies since it was no longer entirely controlled by the World-Commpany.

Again, this wasn't common at the time. At that point there was really only the Apache, Perl, and Python software foundations.



And this where I feel like my personal involvement with Django REALLY begins. For me this is where things went from "I am friends with those folks" to being part of the community. And like with a lot of things in Django's history it happened basically by accident.

At this point Jacob and I had both left the World Company. Jacob to be CTO at Whiskey Media and me to do REVSYS full time which was all Perl and PostgreSQL consulting at that point.

Turns out Jacob had trouble staying on task working from home and wondered if I might want to share a small office with him.

That's when our friend Rikki Endsley asked if I would interview Jacob about the creation of the DSF and write a quick tutorial on Django for Linux Pro Magazine as I had written for her in the past.

I said yes and then thought "Crap, now I have to learn Python!" Turned out Django was WAY better than the Perl MVC framework I had had helped build across the street named Gantry.

Yes, the World Company had dueling Open Source web frameworks there for a hot minute.

However, it shouldn't be ALL that surprising since Lawrence, Kansas is ALSO the home to the first text based web browser Lynx.

It was the home for publications like C/C++ Users Journal, SysAdmin Magazine, and Dr. Dobbs if anyone in here is old enough to remember those. Or hell magazines in general, do you all remember magazines?

Rikki worked on all of those and lived in Lawrence which is why Linux Pro Magazine's headquarters was down the street from us.

Anyway, back to the timeline...

September 2008

First DjangoCon at Google

Googled offered to host the first DjangoCon. It was actually their idea. Keynoted by none other than Guido himself. If you want to see younger versions of some of the original Django folks go dig up some of those videos on YouTube.

2009



Going back to it's roots in journalism
Django helps win the Pulitzer Prize!

Neil Brown, executive editor of the St. Petersburg Times , which launched PolitiFact in August 2007, said the award was "proof that the Web is not a death sentence for newspapers. In fact, PolitiFact marries the power of old-fashioned shoe-leather journalism with an extraordinarily powerful way to present it."

I'm not sure how well that quote has aged over these last years but anyway...

Jack McElroy, editor of the Knoxville News Sentinel , wrote that the award was "the most unusual, and most important, Pulitzer Prize this year."

He wrote, "Online databases are rapidly becoming one of the important tools of watchdog journalism in the digital age. Identifying PolitiFact as the best national reporting of the year will only speed that trend."

2010

Django Dash

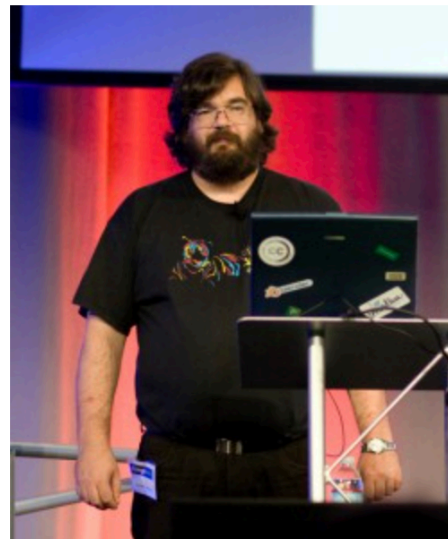
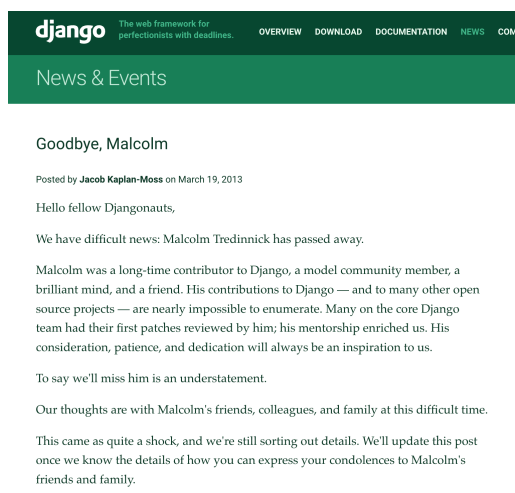
Daniel Lindsley, who also worked with us at the Journal-World, started a weekend Django focused hackathon called Django Dash.

One of the winners of that was...

Read The Docs

[HTTPS://WWW.ERICHOLSCHER.COM/BLOG/2010/AUG/16/ANNOUNCING-READ-DOCS/](https://www.ericolscher.com/blog/2010/aug/16/announcing-read-docs/)

Yup, Read The Docs. Which was started by Eric Holscher who still runs it full time to this day and Bobby Kellog who went on to design Trello.



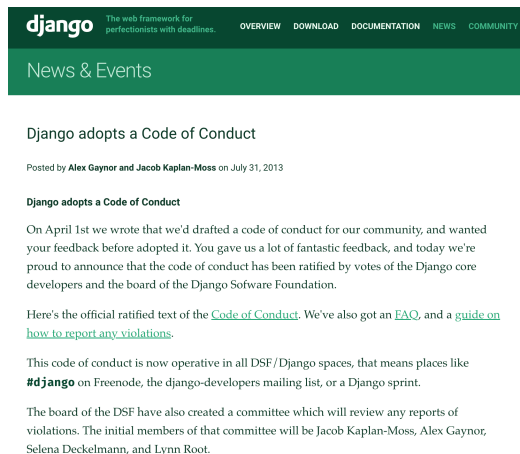
Malcolm Tredinnick speaking at DjangoCon 2008 (by Sebastian Hilling CC BY-NC)

We would be very remiss to not mention Malcolm Tredinnick who died in March 2013 and was one of the instrumental early contributors to Django. Both in terms of writing large portions of the ORM, but also for his mentorship. As the blog post here writes:

"Many on the core Django team had their first patches reviewed by him; his mentorship enriched us. His consideration, patience, and dedication will always be an inspiration to us.

To say we'll miss him is an understatement."

You can still to this day stumble into individual Django source files where Malcolm was the last commit and main where he has the most commits.



Ok back to happier things. In July of 2013 the Board adopts the Code of Conduct governing all official Django spaces, both in person and online.

We weren't the first to do this at all, but we were definitely joining a small group of Open Source communities when we did.

2014

Adrian and Jacob step down as BDFLs

The community was already ahead of them on this in spirit. They weren't exactly checked out, but didn't need to be active as BDFLs because the community was already making all the decisions.

I tried to find evidence of any other BDFLs stepping down but I could not find any, so perhaps they were the first???

2014

DjangoGirls

The Olas (as they are affectionately known) held the first Django Girls workshop, which kicked off Django Girls, during EuroPython 2014 in Berlin.

2014

Tim Graham

Inaugural Fellow

2014 was a busy year for Django as it was ALSO the year the Django Fellowship officially started.

2015

Django Birthday

When Django turned ten years old we decided to throw Django a birthday party in Lawrence, fit for a 10 year old. We got permission to close down a block of downtown and have a block party including...



A birthday cake, talking robot and a bouncy house.



And of course Adrian flew into town to play us some sweet gypsy jazz.

While I think celebrating 10 years is important to note in our history I have to admit I've mostly included it for this next picture where...



I let Simon know the batmobile just arrived on the scene...



it's a replica, but yeah it lives in Lawrence and we see it around town occasionally.

2015 to today

This bit of Django history is fresh and far better documented. Many of you have lived it yourselves and I'm out of time.

The Future

In conclusion

As I've hopefully shown Django's success is partly due to right place / right time, but mostly due to the amazing people who gathered around it over the years.

We are what we protect and what we stand up for.

I implore you to keep up our high standards, of code and docs sure, but also a bit of whimsy. But mostly of our friendliness and inclusivity.

I'm sure you noticed the early history of Django is filled with a lot of white dudes from America, as I look out over this room I see how far we have come but we can continue to do better.

So with that here's to ANOTHER 20 years of Django... now go eat your lunch.