

Forums in PHP MiniBB

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Threaded Discussion Boards in PHP

A paper about forums in PHP would naturally compare whatever product that is there to what PHP Bulletin boards (phpbb.com) has achieved as the king of all PHP threaded discussion boards; it being fast, efficient, and one of few comprehensive applications within the open source community .

MiniBB (**Minimalistic Bulletin Board**) is a PHP based online message board script that adheres by the common community bulletin boards standards; incorporating all the main features and providing a high degree of customization in a fast and reliable manner. MiniBB (www.minibb.com) is a discussion board that focuses on single management allowing the administrator more control over the published information.

Built on PHP and MySQL; the web community application is distributed as an open source product under the General Public License (**GPL**).

MiniBB is not object oriented; the development is based on the standard linear development mechanism; using functions and clear PHP code that mixes format and structure to a certain degree within a single file. The file naming convention explains the functionality provided by the application and consequently simplifies allocating information for further adjustments or enhancements.

The project is currently active on SourceForge (sourceforge.net/projects/minibb/) in its **2.2a** version and provides support through the application's main website MiniBB.com. In spite of the fact that MiniBB was developed by a single individual, it is still considered among the recommended PHP discussion boards scripts, mainly because it offers added functionality such as HTML templates, CSS style sheets that are highly customizable for changing how the application look and feels . Furthermore, search is enhanced to cover any topic within the forum, statistics are posted automatically, and security features for users's IP tracking and **“Captcha”**; security image posting are provided.

Another added functionality is the availability of add-ons, which are part of the architecture and installing them is a task that is handled by the administrator. Installing the application itself is also a clean process of configuring a single file **“setup_options.php”** with the database server access information, user configurations, and other preferences to the performance of the discussion board. The database script is provided in a single **.sql** file that can be executed through PhpMyAdmin or any MySQL database management system .

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Looking through the code of the application, **“index.php”** provides the main logic that processes the different parts of MiniBB, facilitating calling of functions and execution accordingly. Although the code is clear, it lack inline, block, and line comments to explain the various sections of the file. Functions are not documented within the code to allow them to stand out for further development. The entire logic is based on complex nested IF statements that affects comprehension if a developer is to look through the code to make changes. Having said that, the code is still easy to follow-through and the basic file hierarchy would make changes possible in timely manner. In terms of database connectivity, MiniBB is using basic built-in mysql queries to handle saving and updating information on the database. Several functions are created in **“setup_mysql.php”** to handle running queries by passing parameters to the functions. The modularity of rewriting the standard procedures is present in the use of functions to handle returned rows from the database, running commands, and processing complex queries.

The use of Mysql queries makes the application compatible only with MySQL database, a limitation that has been resolved by many applications adapting the more advanced PEAR::DB and ADODB database objects that are transparent to the database type. Furthermore, this places MiniBB at a disadvantage in comparison to phpBB that is supporting multiple databases and thus providing more compatibility with various platforms.

Another element that is worth noticing is how there is a single template for every aspect of the screen that comprises the application. The posted comments, search screen, login forms, and even the status bar can be formatted using the provided HTML files. Smarty mechanism of including parameters is used to preserve the location of coded items.

Furthermore, the html file can incorporate any client side Java Script that is required to display components that are part of the board (www.minibb.com/gallery.html). Open source applications technical support system is based on forums, and hence this is a discussion board application, the MiniBB.com web site committee prides to provide instant support for all technical issues. MiniBB does not require registration for posting messages, a feature that can be disabled by the site administrator, which allows for more visitors to ask questions and post comments about the application. The user tracking mechanism is based on cookies in addition to reading logged in username and password information from the database (*bb_func_login.php*).

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My Conclusion MiniBB is a discussion board application that was developed in the last few years, in spite of the fact that phpBB has already been established as the more comprehensive open source application in this category. This means that the web community is still looking for simpler alternatives or systems that provide specific functionality that is yet to be covered.

In my choice of MiniBB, I was exploring what can be offered more knowing how extensive phpBB is. The answer came in the form of simpler structure, a characteristic that is vital for open source programs if they are to allow other developers to work on the code. The added functionality in terms of template-based design further strengthen the position of MiniBB; with millions of web forums providing minor changes on the default template phpBB provides. In addition, the application provides all the main elements required of a discussion board with extensive support, ease of use, multiple language support, and minor added functionality like anonymous posting .

For small companies seeking a quick and fast solution, or for webmasters who do not wish to spend time with a lot of customization, MiniBB comes as the perfect solution; an easy interface, user friendly templates, and an application size that makes installation quick and painless. On the down side, the application is purely LAMP compatibly, which limits usage by Windows servers. Furthermore, the implementation of purely mysql queries is known to slow down applications as the size of transactions grow and multiple connections requiring more enhanced caching or storing functionality.

For developers, and especially those interested in building plug-ins for MiniBB, the application does not provide enough support in the form of developer's manual and inline comments. The committee at minibb.com should consider rewriting the code in the newer versions to make it richer in documentation and thus attract more developers.

Finally, as a developer and a webmaster, I would recommend checking MiniBB through the test drive demo provided through the community site minibb.com. All aspects of the application are on display including the search facilities, user statistics, and the ease of posting messages and browsing available posts. For a minimalistic application, MiniBB does provide more than what most website owners might need.

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