

# Review of Younicycle

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Younicycle is a platform for collaborative development of web sites, reports, and other content. It is aimed at small- to medium-sized work-groups who need a simple, easy system with which to build data-backed content.

I recently had the opportunity to evaluate Younicycle. Here are my impressions. I used my MacBook running the latest Firefox 2 patchlevel and Flash 10.

## **Some really excellent tools**

Younicycle includes a Flash-based module called GYRE that really impressed me. Its first function is as a drawing and layout tool. It does not have every possible feature of the latest in publishing and layout, but this seemed to me to be a feature: the tools were intuitive to use, and straightforward. If you've used any tool of this sort before, the tools, canvas, and properties view will be familiar.

GYRE is ideally suited to laying out pages for PDF or print. It can also be used for web page layout, but its basic approach is to lay out segments of a fixed-size area. I'll have more to say on this later.

GYRE also contains an application-designer function that allows you to build forms and templates for pages. It makes the development of even fairly complicated applications quite simple, especially in combination with the data source and database functionality built into Younicycle.

Which brings us to the other excellent tool built into the software: PostgreSQL. Postgres is an enterprise-quality, free relational database management system. It's the sort of thing that you'd pay big money to Oracle or IBM to license, except that Postgres is free software. The big problem with these sort of enterprise-grade database systems is usually that they require too great a learning curve on the part of users. Younicycle solves this by adding an interface to Postgres that should make anyone already familiar with Access or FileMaker completely comfortable. What is better, however, is that Younicycle offers access to the heavyweight features of Postgres as well, so if you have reason to dive in and learn about procedural languages, functions, and triggers, you still have that option. I think that this "everyone welcome" approach in Younicycle

is one of its big strengths. The interface to this sort of functionality could easily be either overwhelming or terrifically clumsy, but the Younicycle designers obviously thought hard about this part.

## **Easy access to non-database data sources**

Younicycle allows you to use any XML data source you can reach. This of course means that any Atompub data source becomes a ready data source for applications you build inside Younicycle. In this age of “mash-ups”, this isn’t such a revolutionary idea, but what is really cool about Younicycle is the ease with which you can build this sort of application. It isn’t necessary to become skilled with scripting languages or XML to be able to build the application.

The obvious target for this kind of tool is in growing companies. It’s quite common to find that companies now have far more data than the development and data departments can make available. The people who want to use the data have a nascent idea of what they want, but it usually takes two or three iterations before the application is really doing what the consumer of the data wants it to do. If it were easy to give those consumers access to the data, and let them have at it, that would be better. Younicycle provides a way to do this. And, since it’s a stock PostgreSQL system underneath, it should be trivial to get the data into the system.

Financial departments in small companies are a good example of this. Often, there is a desire on the part of a few key management people to do analysis on the company data. The company is too small, and is changing too quickly, to make a full-time data analyst practical. But the regular “geeks” in the IT department are just too busy to provide the support needed for new applications. Younicycle would be an excellent solution to this sort of case.

Similarly, in very small organizations without any or many IT specialists, Younicycle is a great way to deliver the power of real, database-backed systems to those groups.

## **Collaboration**

The Younicycle design assumes that there is more than one login to an account. This means that it becomes trivial for different users to collaborate on a given project. Just as in its ability to take any XML data source from the web and handle it, this is another example of Younicycle taking inspiration from the spirit of the web, and making it easy for non-specialists to develop applications the same way.

## **Some areas for future development**

Given its integration with content from the web, Younicycle does have one fairly serious limitation: its use of CSS. In this area, Younicycle betrays its evident history as originally designed for reporting. Page layout is a fixed “canvas” over which areas are defined. Text elements and such are anchored to those areas. If

a user resizes the font in a window, the layout is at best confusing and at worst destroyed. For Younicycle to be a really solid basis for large web sites, this deficiency will need to be addressed. If it is, Younicycle could easily become a choice application for website development. Making a pretty site is often easier than making one that interfaces easily with a database system, so the excellent integration with Postgres is what makes Younicycle attractive. Adding solid CSS support would eliminate this trade-off.

## **Summary**

In conclusion, Younicycle is an obvious candidate for any reporting and data aggregation needs you might have, especially in small groups and where you don't have a lot of database staff available to help. Its ability to interface with external data sources in XML means that combining your own data and foreign data is a breeze for people who don't have a lot of programming and scripting skill. At the same time, the power of PostgreSQL means the system is a full-fledged database system, capable of scaling with the best in the industry. Finally, the fine graphic and layout tools mean that producing PDFs for reporting and invoicing is a breeze. All of this makes Younicycle an excellent contender for use in small and medium-sized businesses. If you need to support this sort of environment, you should take a look.