WordPress powers 60 percent of the CMS market. That is a staggering number, and it is well deserved. But market share is not the same thing as technical superiority. There is a mature, open-source alternative that ships with features WordPress requires dozens of plugins to replicate — and almost nobody outside the development community is talking about it.

Two Platforms, Two Philosophies

WordPress and Joomla are both open-source PHP content management systems, but they were built with fundamentally different philosophies. One started as a blogging tool and grew into a CMS. The other was a full-featured content management system from the very beginning — and it has been around longer than most people realize.

WordPress began on May 27, 2003, when Matt Mullenweg and Mike Little released the first version as a fork of **b2/cafelog**, a PHP blogging platform whose original developer had gone silent. The project started as a simple blogging tool with a laser focus on making web publishing easy. That simplicity became both its greatest strength and, as critics have argued for two decades, its most persistent architectural limitation.

Joomla is widely — and correctly — considered the same platform as **Mambo**, which was first released in **April 2001** by the Australian company Miro International. That makes the Mambo/Joomla platform roughly **two years older than WordPress**. Mambo was not a blogging tool. It was a full CMS from day one, with structured content management, template-driven presentation, and an extension architecture designed for complex websites.

In August 2005, the entire core development team behind Mambo left the project over concerns about corporate governance, commercial influence from the Mambo Foundation, and the direction of the project. They took the codebase with them, renamed it **Joomla** — from the Swahili word *jumla*, meaning "all together" — and continued development under a new, community-governed non-profit called Open Source Matters. The code, the architecture, the extensions, and the community all carried over. With the exception of the name, it is the same platform. The first official Joomla release (1.0) arrived on September 1, 2005, but its lineage traces directly back to Mambo in 2001.

The timing matters, but not the way most people assume. The Mambo/Joomla platform actually **predates WordPress by two years**. WordPress had the simplicity advantage of being a lightweight blogging tool that gradually evolved into a general-purpose CMS. The Mambo/Joomla platform entered the market as an established, full-featured CMS with structured user permissions, modular architecture, and a growing extension ecosystem. By the time the Joomla name appeared in 2005, WordPress had already built the momentum that would eventually make it the most widely adopted publishing platform in history — but it was still catching up to Mambo feature-for-feature in the CMS department.

By the Numbers

Before comparing features, it helps to understand the scale difference between these two platforms. The following table uses current data from W3Techs, wordpress.org, and the Joomla

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Extensions Directory.

Metric	WordPress	Joomla
Platform Origin	Fork of b2/cafelog (2003)	Continuation of Mambo (2001); renamed Joomla in 2005
First Public Release	May 27, 2003	April 2001 (as Mambo)
Share of All Websites	42.7%	1.3%
CMS Market Share	59.9%	1.8%
Estimated Active Sites	450+ million	~2 million
Current Stable Version	6.9	5.3
Core Language	PHP	PHP
Default Database	MySQL / MariaDB	MySQL / MariaDB / PostgreSQL
License	GPL v2	GPL v2
Extensions (Official Directory)	61,000+ plugins (free on wordpress.org) plus tens of thousands of commercial plugins on third-party marketplaces	~4,800 extensions on the JED (free and commercial combined)
Themes / Templates	14,000+ free on wordpress.org plus thousands more on ThemeForest and other marketplaces	Hundreds of free templates plus established commercial framework providers
Governing Body	WordPress Foundation	Open Source Matters, Inc.

Sources: W3Techs CMS comparison, WordPress.org statistics, Joomla Extensions Directory. *All figures current as of early 2026.*

Those numbers tell one story: WordPress dominates in adoption. But they do not tell the whole story. Market share reflects ease of entry, marketing muscle, and first-mover advantage — not necessarily technical capability. Internet Explorer once held 95 percent of the browser market. The best tool does not always win the popularity contest.

Architecture Under the Hood

This is where the conversation gets interesting for developers and for anyone who has to maintain a website over the long term.

WordPress: The Hook and Filter System

WordPress does **not** follow the Model-View-Controller (MVC) pattern. Instead, it uses an **event-driven architecture** built around hooks: *actions* and *filters*. Actions let developers inject code at specific points during execution. Filters let them modify data before it reaches the browser. This system is remarkably flexible and easy to learn, which is a major reason WordPress attracted

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such a massive developer community early on.

The trade-off is architectural discipline. WordPress themes can contain virtually any PHP code — database queries, business logic, API calls — all mixed in with HTML output. There is no enforced separation between data handling, business rules, and presentation. A single theme template file might query the database, process results, and render HTML in the same 50 lines of code. For a personal blog, this works perfectly. For a complex web application with dozens of content types, multiple user roles, and custom workflows, the lack of guardrails becomes a liability that compounds over time.

Joomla: True MVC From the Start

Joomla has been built on a **true Model-View-Controller architecture** since version 1.5, released in January 2008. Every component enforces the MVC pattern:

- **Models** handle data access and business logic
- **Views** handle presentation, output, and formatting
- **Controllers** handle request routing and application flow

This separation is enforced by the framework, not merely suggested by a coding style guide. The result is code that is more maintainable, more testable, and easier for development teams to collaborate on. When a developer picks up another developer's Joomla component, they know exactly where to find the database queries (model), the HTML output (view), and the request handling logic (controller).

Joomla also ships a **standalone application framework** that can be used completely independently of the CMS itself. Developers can build custom PHP applications on the same MVC architecture without CMS overhead. Additionally, the extension system is more structured than WordPress: extensions are divided into four distinct types — **components** (full MVC applications), **modules** (lightweight display blocks), **plugins** (event handlers), and **templates** (presentation layer) — each with clearly defined roles and boundaries.

Feature by Feature: What Ships in the Box

The most revealing comparison is not what each platform *can* do — given enough plugins, both can do almost anything. The comparison that matters is what each platform *ships with* out of the box: no additional downloads, no premium licenses, no third-party dependencies.

Feature	WordPress	Joomla
Access Control (ACL)	5 fixed roles: Administrator, Editor, Author, Contributor, Subscriber	Granular ACL with unlimited custom groups and per-asset permission overrides
Multilingual Content	Requires plugin: WPML at $99/year or free Polylang with feature limitations	Built into core with native language associations and automatic content linking
Two-Factor Authentication	Requires plugin (the most-used	Built into core since version 3.2,

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Feature	WordPress	Joomla
	one has approximately 100,000 installs)	released in 2013
Content Versioning	Post revisions: stores every revision, can bloat the database without manual limits	Configurable version history with maximum count setting and one-click restore
Custom Fields	Basic support in core since 5.0; most sites use the Advanced Custom Fields plugin	Full custom fields framework built into core since version 3.7
Media Manager	Basic media library with limited folder organization	Full media manager with nested folders, inline image editing, and metadata
Content Categories	Categories and tags, flat or hierarchical	Unlimited nested category tree with per-category access permissions
URL Routing	Pretty permalinks via .htaccess rewrite rules	SEF URLs with configurable router and per-article URL aliases
Database Support	MySQL and MariaDB only	MySQL, MariaDB, and PostgreSQL
Cron / Task Scheduler	WP-Cron: simulated cron triggered by page visits	Built-in task scheduler with native support for real server cron jobs
CLI Tool	WP-CLI available as a separate download and install	Built-in CLI application ships with core
Template Overrides	Child themes with full file replacement	Granular template overrides and layout overrides per individual component
Web Services API	REST API in core	REST API in core with auto-generated endpoints for content types
Guided Tours / Onboarding	Not available in core	Built-in guided tours for new administrators
Customizable Mail Templates	Not configurable in core (requires plugin)	Editable mail templates in the core administrator panel
Workflow / Publishing Stages	Draft and Published states only (plugins needed for review workflows)	Configurable publishing workflow with custom stages and transitions

Count the rows where Joomla provides a built-in solution and WordPress requires a plugin or has no answer at all. That gap is not a minor inconvenience. Each plugin a WordPress site depends on adds a potential point of failure, a potential security vulnerability, and a potential compatibility issue on every update cycle.

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The Extension Ecosystem

The WordPress Plugin Directory on wordpress.org lists over **61,000 plugins**, all of which must be free under the GPL. Tens of thousands of additional commercial plugins are sold through third-party marketplaces like CodeCanyon, independent developer sites, and subscription clubs. The total WordPress plugin ecosystem likely exceeds **100,000 extensions**. Joomla has approximately **4,800 extensions** in the Joomla Extensions Directory (JED), which lists both free and commercial offerings in a single directory. On the surface, those numbers look like an overwhelming advantage for WordPress. A closer look reveals a more complicated picture.

Quantity vs. Quality

The WordPress plugin count includes thousands of abandoned, outdated, or near-identical extensions. Search the plugin directory for "contact form" and you will find hundreds of options in varying states of maintenance. Many have not been updated in years but remain listed as available. The sheer volume creates decision fatigue and makes vetting reliable extensions an exercise in trial and error.

The JED is smaller but more actively curated. Extensions are reviewed, categorized, and must meet minimum quality and compatibility standards. The smaller count also reflects a fundamental architectural difference: Joomla ships with more functionality in core. You simply do not need an extension for features like multilingual support, custom fields, access control, two-factor authentication, or publishing workflows. Those are all included out of the box.

The Freemium Problem

A significant portion of the WordPress plugin ecosystem operates on a **freemium model**. The free version provides basic functionality while essential features are locked behind a premium subscription. This creates a deceptive marketplace where "free" comes with significant strings attached:

- Yoast SEO: free version analyzes only one focus keyword per page. Multiple keywords require Yoast Premium.
- Elementor: free version locks out custom fonts, custom CSS, form widgets, and popup builders. Pro starts at $59/year.
- WooCommerce: technically free, but nearly every meaningful addition — subscriptions, memberships, bookings, product bundles — requires a paid extension to the extension.

The Joomla extension ecosystem is not immune to commercial licensing, but the model tends to be more straightforward. Many Joomla developers offer a single licensed product with full functionality rather than the multi-tiered upsell approach that has become standard on the WordPress side.

What the Top WordPress Plugins Reveal

The most-installed WordPress plugins tell you exactly what the core is missing. Data from the

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WordPress Plugin Directory:

- **Elementor** (10 million+ active installs) — page builder, because the default editor is not sufficient for most layouts
- **Yoast SEO** (10 million+ active installs) — on-page SEO, because WordPress provides minimal SEO tooling
- **Contact Form 7** (10 million+ active installs) — forms, because WordPress has no form builder in core
- **Classic Editor** (9 million+ active installs) — reverts the block editor, because millions of users rejected Gutenberg
- **WooCommerce** (7 million+ active installs) — e-commerce, because WordPress has no commerce functionality
- **LiteSpeed Cache** (7 million+ active installs) — caching and optimization, because WordPress needs external help with performance

The Classic Editor number is particularly telling. **Nine million active installations** of a plugin whose sole purpose is to undo a core WordPress feature — the Gutenberg block editor, introduced in WordPress 5.0 in December 2018. That is not a sign of healthy adoption. It is a vote of no confidence from a significant portion of the user base.

Templates, Themes, and the Design Ecosystem

WordPress offers over **14,000 free themes** in its official directory plus tens of thousands more through third-party marketplaces like ThemeForest (Envato). The most popular free themes include Astra, Hello Elementor, Kadence, OceanWP, Blocksy, and GeneratePress. On the commercial side, Divi by Elegant Themes and the Genesis Framework by StudioPress (now owned by WP Engine) are among the most widely deployed.

There is a catch. Many WordPress themes are tightly coupled to specific page builder plugins. A theme built for Elementor becomes functionally useless if you later decide to switch to a different design tool. This creates a form of vendor lock-in within an ostensibly open-source ecosystem. Your content is free, but your layout is hostage to a plugin dependency.

The Joomla Template Ecosystem

Joomla has fewer free templates in any single directory, but it has a strong lineup of professional template providers who have been building frameworks for over a decade:

- **JoomlArt** — T4 framework with dozens of responsive, professionally designed templates
- **YOOtheme** — YOOtheme Pro, a powerful visual page builder and template system
- **RocketTheme** — Gantry framework with a drag-and-drop layout builder
- **GavickPro** — News, business, and portfolio-focused templates
- **JoomShaper** — Helix Ultimate framework with SP Page Builder
- **Shape5** — Vertex framework with a visual layout customizer
- **Nicepage** — Drag-and-drop visual site builder available across multiple CMS platforms

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The key difference is architectural. Joomla templates support **granular template overrides** at the component and layout level. You can override the output of any component, module, or layout without modifying the original extension code. WordPress child themes work at the file level — you replace an entire template file or nothing. Joomla gives you a scalpel; WordPress gives you a sledgehammer.

Security: Core vs. Plugin

Both platforms take core security seriously, and both have experienced vulnerabilities over their lifetimes. But the security posture of each platform in practice is very different, and the reason comes down to architecture and plugin dependency.

WordPress: The Plugin Attack Surface

WordPress is the most targeted CMS on the internet. According to annual CMS security reports, WordPress accounts for over **90 percent of all CMS-related security incidents**. While some of that is simply a function of market share (the biggest target gets the most attacks), the overwhelming majority of WordPress vulnerabilities come not from the core but from **third-party plugins and themes**.

When your site depends on 15 to 30 plugins — which is typical for a WordPress site with any meaningful functionality — you are trusting 15 to 30 independent development teams to maintain security standards you have no control over. A single vulnerability in one abandoned plugin can compromise the entire site.

WordPress does not include two-factor authentication in core. The most popular 2FA plugin has approximately 100,000 active installs out of 450+ million WordPress sites. That means the vast majority of WordPress installations are running with single-factor authentication in a threat landscape that has moved well beyond passwords.

Joomla: Security by Default

Joomla has shipped **two-factor authentication in core since version 3.2**, released in November 2013 — over a decade of native 2FA support. Every Joomla installation has this capability available from the moment the CMS is installed.

Joomla also benefits from requiring fewer third-party extensions for standard functionality. Fewer extensions means a smaller attack surface. The features that WordPress sites achieve through plugin stacks — multilingual support, granular access control, custom fields, content workflows — are part of the Joomla core and maintained by the core security team.

Joomla has a dedicated **Joomla Security Strike Team (JSST)** that handles vulnerability reports and coordinates responsible disclosure. The platform also enforces strong password hashing (bcrypt) and provides configurable session handling, CSRF protection, and database query parameterization as core framework features.

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The WordPress Admin Panel Problem

One of the most common complaints from experienced WordPress users has nothing to do with code quality or features. It is about the **admin experience**.

Open the dashboard of a typical WordPress site with a dozen plugins installed and you will see:

- Banner ads for premium versions of installed plugins
- Notification bars urging upgrades, reviews, and referrals
- Dashboard widgets promoting related products and services
- Menu items that lead to upsell pages disguised as settings
- Pop-up modals requesting five-star reviews

The WordPress admin has, for many users, become an **advertising platform**. Every free plugin is incentivized to push its premium tier as aggressively as possible because that is how the freemium model sustains itself. The result is an administrative interface that feels more like a software marketplace than a content management tool.

WordPress recognized this was a problem and introduced plugin guidelines discouraging intrusive advertising. Enforcement has been inconsistent, and the most popular plugins continue to push notifications at every opportunity because the financial incentive outweighs the guideline.

The Joomla administrator panel, by contrast, is a **clean, professional workspace**. The admin dashboard provides system information, quick links, and recent articles without third-party advertising. Joomla extensions can add admin panels and configuration pages, but the culture of aggressive in-dashboard upselling that pervades the WordPress ecosystem has not taken root in the Joomla community.

WordPress.com vs. WordPress.org: The Confusion Factor

There are effectively two "WordPress" products, and the distinction confuses beginners every single day.

- **WordPress.org** — The open-source software you download and self-host. This is the "real" WordPress: free, GPL-licensed, fully customizable. You need your own web hosting and domain.
- **WordPress.com** — A hosted service operated by **Automattic**, the for-profit company co-founded by WordPress creator Matt Mullenweg. The free tier gives you a *yoursite.wordpress.com* subdomain with no plugin access and limited customization. Paid plans range from $4/month to $45/month; you need the Business plan ($33/month) or higher to install plugins at all.

This dual identity creates a confusing ecosystem. Many first-time users start at WordPress.com, build a site on the free tier, and only later discover they cannot install the plugins and themes they were reading about — because those articles were written for WordPress.org. The migration

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path from .com to .org is not seamless and can involve rethinking hosting, domain configuration, and site structure.

The overlap is not accidental. Automattic benefits commercially from the brand confusion because the WordPress.com name drives traffic and sign-ups. In September 2024, the tensions within this arrangement became publicly visible when Matt Mullenweg **blocked WP Engine** — one of the largest WordPress hosting companies — from accessing the wordpress.org plugin and theme repositories. The dispute, rooted in trademark licensing and financial disagreements, disrupted millions of WP Engine customers and raised serious questions about the governance of an ecosystem where one individual controls both the non-profit foundation and the dominant commercial entity.

Joomla maintains a cleaner separation. launch.joomla.org provides free hosted Joomla sites for testing and learning, but there is no commercial hosted platform competing with the open-source project. Open Source Matters, Inc. manages the project as a genuine non-profit without a parallel for-profit entity controlled by the same leadership. The result is a governance structure that is more transparent and less vulnerable to conflicts of interest.

Both Free, Both Open Source, Both LAMP

It is worth emphasizing what these platforms have in common because the similarities are as significant as the differences.

- **Both are 100 percent free and open source** under the GNU General Public License v2
- **Both run on the LAMP stack**: Linux, Apache, MySQL, PHP — the most widely available hosting environment on the planet
- **Both work with Nginx**, MariaDB, and other server alternatives
- **Both are managed by non-profit foundations** (WordPress Foundation and Open Source Matters)
- **Both can be installed on virtually any shared hosting plan** — no special server requirements
- **Both have been under active development for over 20 years**

The one infrastructure difference worth noting: Joomla supports **PostgreSQL** in addition to MySQL and MariaDB. WordPress remains MySQL/MariaDB only. For organizations already running PostgreSQL databases, Joomla eliminates the need to maintain a separate MySQL instance solely for the CMS.

When WordPress Is the Right Choice

Fairness matters. WordPress dominates for reasons beyond marketing, and there are legitimate scenarios where it is the stronger choice:

- **Simple blogs and personal sites** — WordPress was born as a blogging platform and it remains the best in the world at that specific job
- **Maximum plugin selection** — if you need a very niche integration (a specific CRM

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connector, a particular payment gateway, a specialized booking tool), the odds of finding a WordPress plugin are significantly higher
- **Developer and designer availability** — finding a WordPress developer or designer is easier and often less expensive because of the larger talent pool
- **Ease of entry for non-technical users** — the famous "five-minute install" and the intuitive post editor make WordPress approachable for people with no technical background
- **E-commerce via WooCommerce** — despite its plugin-based nature, WooCommerce is the most widely deployed open-source e-commerce solution, with a massive ecosystem of its own
- **Community and learning resources** — WordPress has more tutorials, courses, forums, meetups, and WordCamps than any other CMS platform

If your project is a straightforward blog, a small business brochure site, or an online store where WooCommerce meets your requirements, WordPress is a proven and reliable choice. Its dominance is not an accident — it earned that position through years of being genuinely easy to use.

When Joomla Is the Better Fit

The scenarios where Joomla outperforms WordPress tend to involve complexity, scale, and long-term maintainability:

- **Organizations with multiple user groups** — Joomla’s granular ACL handles complex permission structures without any plugins. Schools, governments, membership organizations, and corporate intranets benefit enormously from this.
- **Multilingual websites** — native multilingual support with content associations eliminates the $99/year WPML tax and the technical debt that comes with depending on a premium plugin for a core website function.
- **Government and enterprise deployments** — many government organizations worldwide use Joomla because of its ACL depth, security posture, and built-in accessibility features. Notable adopters have historically included municipalities, universities, and national agencies.
- **Developers who value clean architecture** — the true MVC pattern, the four-type extension system, and the standalone framework appeal to developers coming from structured programming backgrounds in Java, .NET, or modern PHP frameworks like Laravel or Symfony.
- **Sites that need to be self-contained** — if minimizing third-party dependencies is a priority (for security, compliance, or maintainability), Joomla’s richer core feature set means fewer extensions to manage, update, audit, and troubleshoot.
- **Long-term projects** — Joomla’s structured migration path (version 3 to 4 to 5, with clear deprecation cycles) and its architectural consistency make it more predictable for sites that need to run for years or decades. WordPress’s Gutenberg transition, by contrast, disrupted millions of sites and is still not fully accepted by the user base seven years later.

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The Bottom Line

This is not a question of which CMS is "better." That framing is too simplistic for a decision with this many variables. The honest answer is that each platform has a different design philosophy, a different architectural foundation, and a different sweet spot.

WordPress wins on ecosystem breadth, ease of entry, and sheer market momentum. If you need a site up fast, with maximum plugin choices and the widest possible pool of developers available for hire, WordPress is the pragmatic default.

Joomla wins on architectural depth, built-in capability, and long-term maintainability. If your project requires granular permissions, native multilingual support, a clean MVC codebase, or a security posture that does not depend on a stack of third-party plugins, Joomla delivers those things out of the box — and has for over a decade.

The CMS nobody talks about at dinner parties may be the one engineering teams keep choosing when the project requirements get serious. Market share measures popularity. It does not measure capability. And sometimes the tool that does the actual job better is the one that never needed a marketing budget to prove it.

Sources and Further Reading

- W3Techs — WordPress vs. Joomla Usage Statistics
- WordPress.org — Version and Usage Statistics
- WordPress Plugin Directory (61,000+ free plugins, plus thousands of commercial plugins on third-party marketplaces)
- WordPress Theme Directory (14,000+ free themes, plus thousands more on ThemeForest and other marketplaces)
- Joomla Extensions Directory (~4,800 extensions, free and commercial)
- Joomla Core Features and Benefits
- About Joomla — Joomla.org
- Joomla Technical Requirements (Joomla 5 and 6)

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Data Sources: W3Techs (CMS market share), WordPress.org (plugin and theme counts, version statistics), Joomla Extensions Directory (extension count), Joomla.org (features and technical requirements).

All statistics reflect publicly available data as of early 2026. Market share and extension counts change frequently. Visit the linked sources for the most current numbers.

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