The messy WordPress drama, explained

WordPress is essentially internet infrastructure. It's widely used, generally stable, and doesn't tend to generate many splashy headlines as a result.

But over the last week, the WordPress community has swept up into a battle over the ethos of the platform. Last week, WordPress cofounder Matt Mullenweg came out with a harsh attack on WP Engine, a major WordPress hosting provider, calling the company a "cancer" to the community. The statement has cracked open a public debate surrounding how profit-driven companies can and can't use open-source software — and if they're obligated to contribute something to the projects they use in return.

The conflict has escalated in the days since with a barrage of legal threats and has left swaths of website operators caught in the crossfire of a conflict beyond their control. WP Engine customers were cut off from accessing WordPress.org's servers, preventing them from easily updating or installing plugins and themes. And while they've been granted a temporary reprieve, WP Engine is now facing a deadline to resolve the conflict or have its customers' access fall apart once again.

WP Engine is a third-party hosting company that uses the free, open-source WordPress software to create and sell its own prepackaged WordPress hosting service. Founded in 2010, WP Engine has grown to become a rival to WordPress.com, with more than 200,000 websites using the service to power their online presence.

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ideals, it just wants return on capital.”

Mullenweg leads two different WordPresses. There’s WordPress.org, the open-source project that develops the backbone of the WordPress publishing platform, and then there’s WordPress.com, a company that sells a hosted version of the open-source WordPress software – just like WP Engine. Mullenweg runs Automattic, which owns WordPress.com. Data suggests that around 43 percent of all websites use WordPress, but it’s not clear how many are hosted by WordPress.com or another party.

Along with selling plans on WordPress.com, Automattic contributes a lot of development effort to the open source project, which itself relies on donations and community contributions to run. According to Mullenweg, the team contributes 3,988 hours per week. The company may not have to pay to use WordPress, but it certainly pays to develop and improve it.

WP Engine operates a bit differently. It says it focuses on investing in the community through sponsorships and encouraging the adoption of the platform. The hosting platform was acquired by the private equity firm Silver Lake in 2018, and Mullenweg views it as a business that profits off of open-source code without giving anything back.

That frustration came to a head last week when Mullenweg took the stage at WordCamp – a WP Engine-sponsored WordPress conference – and took direct aim at WP Engine. “The company is controlled by Silver Lake, a private equity firm with $102 million in assets under management,” Mullenweg said. “Silver Lake doesn’t give a dang about your open source ideals – it just wants return on capital. So, it’s at this point I ask everyone in the WordPress community to go vote with your wallet. Who are you going to give your money to: someone who is going to nourish the ecosystem or someone who is going to frack every bit of value out of it until it withers?”

Mullenweg followed up this statement with a September 21st blog post, where he lambasted WP Engine for contributing just 40 hours per week to the WordPress.org open source project. “WP Engine is setting a poor standard that others may look at and think is ok to replicate. We must set a higher standard to ensure WordPress is here for the next 100 years,” Mullenweg wrote in the blog. He ripped into WP Engine even more, saying it’s “strip-mining the WordPress ecosystem” and giving users a “crappier experience so they can make more money.”

Mullenweg isn’t just defending the ethos of open source — he’s also defending his competing WordPress provider

Mullenweg doesn’t appear to be wrong about WP Engine’s contributions. But WP Engine is ultimately abiding by the rules of WordPress’ open-source license: it’s generally free to use, and WP Engine doesn’t *have* to give back to the WordPress community just because it’s banking off the open-source code. Of course, it’d be nice if WP Engine did, but nothing requires that it do so.

Complicating this further: Mullenweg isn’t just defending the ethos of open source — he’s also defending his competing WordPress provider. In his blog post, he claims WP Engine is “profiting off of the confusion” caused by the company’s branding. Mullenweg alleges that WP Engine is promising to give customers WordPress but that the company is actually offering a distilled version of the service. He goes on to say WP Engine will need a commercial license for the “unauthorized” use of the WordPress trademark, which is controlled by the WordPress Foundation and later sent a cease and desist letter in an attempt to make the company pay up.

WP Engine isn’t staying silent. It sent a cease and desist letter that tells a very different story of what has been going on behind the scenes. In its letter, WP Engine claims Automattic demanded a “very large sum of money” days before Mullenweg’s keynote at the September 20th WordCamp convention

– and if the company didn’t receive it, Mullenweg allegedly threatened to carry out a “scorched earth nuclear approach” toward WP Engine.

WP Engine alleges Mullenweg harassed the company through text messages and calls, with one screenshotted text saying: “If I’m going to make the case to the WP community about why we’re banning WPE I need to do it in my talk tomorrow.” The texts, which Mullenweg confirmed he sent in an interview with Twitch streamer ThePrimeagen, say he prepared several presentation slides for his WordCamp talk, with the working title “How Private Equity can Hollow out and Destroy Open Source Communities, a Story in 4 Parts.”

After WP Engine refused to pay WordPress, the company alleges Mullenweg followed through on his threats. “Mr. Mullenweg’s covert demand that WP Engine hand over tens of millions to his for-profit company Automattic, while publicly masquerading as an altruistic protector of the WordPress community, is disgraceful,” WP Engine’s letter states. “WP Engine will not accede to these unconscionable demands which not only harm WP Engine and its employees, but also threaten the entire WordPress community.”

WordPress.org has now made it clear that it’s going after WP Engine for not only failing to give back to the WordPress project but also for its alleged misuse of the WordPress trademark. Mullenweg now says Automattic has given WP Engine two ways to “pay their fair share”: either by paying a licensing fee or making contributions to the open source WordPress project. “This isn’t a money grab: it’s an expectation that any business making hundreds of millions of dollars off of an open source project ought to give back, and if they don’t, then they can’t use its trademarks,” Mullenweg said.

The WordPress Foundation – the charitable organization that backs the open source WordPress project – is led by Mullenweg

and other lesser-known board members who aren't displayed on its website. It seems the WordPress Foundation has made some tweaks to its trademark guidelines in recent days. As of September 19th, the policy said you are "free" to use the WP abbreviation in "any way you see fit." But now WordPress has deleted that language, replacing it with a line that says not to use WP "in a way that confuses people. For example, many people think WP Engine is 'WordPress Engine.'" The updated policy also explicitly states: "If you would like to use the WordPress trademark commercially, please contact Automattic, they have the exclusive license."

WordPress.org banned WP Engine from accessing its servers free over their "legal claims and litigation" — a move that has made it more difficult for customers to use WP Engine. However, Mullenweg decided to temporarily remove the block just two days later. He's given WP Engine until October 1st to create their own mirror or resolve the conflict. "Why should WordPress.org provide these services to WP Engine for free, given their attacks on us?" Mullenweg wrote. WP Engine says it only sent a cease and desist order to WordPress and has not yet filed a lawsuit.

When asked about the ban on WP Engine, Automattic spokesperson Megan Fox said in a statement to *The Verge* that "trademark violations have resulted in the company being blocked from some WordPress resources." WP Engine pointed *The Verge* to its statements on X when reached for comment.

The fight has garnered a mix of reactions. On one side, people think WP Engine is in the wrong, with some saying the company *should* contribute more to the open source project and that its use of "WP" is misleading. On the other, some WordPress community members are calling on Mullenweg to step down and accuse of him abusing his power over WordPress.org and WordPress.com. Others believe the situation could result in a fork of WordPress and brought up concerns about whether WordPress will take action against other companies using the

“WP” abbreviation or trademark.

But in a dispute that’s meant to clarify what is and isn’t WordPress, Mullenweg risks blurring the lines even more. WordPress.org and WordPress.com both have a point — but it looks an awful lot like they’re working together to make it.

https://www.theverge.com/2024/9/27/24256361/wordpress-wp-engine-drama-explained-matt-mullenweg