

Learning About WordPress

Long before Johann Gutenberg invented the printing press and the first printed Holy Bible was mass-produced, humans were instinctually creating content. Civilizations scribed their experiences and histories on scrolls and in massive tomes by hand. In some cases, it was little more than pictures on the walls of caves.

Though these processes were tedious, they filled the human need to articulate thoughts and pass stories on to the next generation. The printing press has enabled humans to evolve scribing to another level. Content can be passed on in many forms, such as in personal or commercial literature, and is widely accessible.

Today, via the Internet, humanity has taken content production to yet another level with blogging platforms and content management systems. WordPress, a project of this evolution, has emerged as a preferred platform for content production and continues to evolve to meet our ever-changing content needs. It provides a vehicle to pass down stories, accounts, and histories to this, and future, generations.

WordPress is free and easy to install, so anyone can use it without much effort. It's also open source, so developers can take the code, re-use it, and improve upon it.

IN THIS CHAPTER

A brief history of WordPress

Leveraging the WordPress community

WordPress by the numbers

Ten things you need to know about WordPress

Understanding open source and the General Public License

A Brief History of WordPress

Back in the old days of Web publishing (circa 1995–2000), if you wanted to have a Web site, you needed to have some degree of understanding of the code to put the site together. It was assumed that to have a Web site, you had to be a geek who could sit down, throw together some semblance

Part I: Getting Started with WordPress

of hypertext markup language (HTML), and then, if you were good enough, maybe have a Web site that attracted lots of people.

Of course, in those days, “lots of people” meant maybe 300 readers. The search engines were not designed to attract a lot of content. Unlike today, it was impossible to build a Web site that had millions of viewers, disseminated across the Internet. There was no such thing as RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds and every page was handcrafted for the content that existed on it.

The only *dynamic* content — that is, content controlled by a database and users and not pre-fabricated for a specialized Web site — that existed at that time was in the form of Bulletin Board Systems (BBS). Forums began evolving around Usenet, an early form of chat, and walled communities such as AOL.

In 1999, Evan Williams (known today as a persistent entrepreneur because of his involvement in major projects such as Blogger, Odeo, and Twitter) and Meg Hourihan launched a new service called Blogger. Blogger, which was eventually acquired by Google, became the great-grandfather of the modern day blog and set up an “arms race” between subsequent rivals SixApart (proprietor of the MovableType and TypePad platforms, to name a few) and a smattering of other smaller upstart competitors.

The rise to blogging had begun.

The creation of WordPress

In 2001, a new open source blogging platform, b2/cafeblog, was released. Active development continued through 2003, when it was largely left abandoned. A young blogger, photographer, and freshman University of Houston student named Matt Mullenweg had been a user of b2/cafeblog and decided in 2003, along with another active b2/cafeblog user and developer, Mike Little, to take the b2/cafeblog code and create a new project — a process called *forking* — and WordPress was born as WordPress 0.70.

A year later, in 2004, WordPress released its first game-changing release with version 1.2. This release brought about the fabled plugin architecture and application programming interface (API) that makes the WordPress platform so flexible. Figure 1.1 illustrates the evolution of WordPress from a simple administrative interface to its current version.

Cross-Reference

Plugins, plugin architecture, and the WordPress API are discussed in more detail in Part II. A full plugin hook reference is provided in Appendix A. ■

Rival platform, Movable Type, made a move in 2004 that ignited a massive exodus to WordPress. The creators of Movable Type took their wildly popular software and made it “pay per play,” so to speak, charging all but the smallest blogs for access to the platform. Though they reversed this move in 2008, a large portion of the most influential bloggers at the time moved their sites to WordPress (and by move, I mean they moved the blog to the new platform and became very vocal advocates of “free,” “open source,” and WordPress).

FIGURE 1.1

The evolution of the WordPress administrative interface, from version 1.5 in 2004 to the current version (based on version 2.7 introduced in 2008)



In 2005, the famed theme architecture and a page management feature debuted in WordPress 1.5. Pages and themes continue to be influencers that make WordPress versatile as a content management system, as well as a blog platform.

Part I: Getting Started with WordPress

Note

WordPress releases take the name of jazz musicians due to the tradition started by founder Matt Mullenweg. As well as being a software developer, Mullenweg is an established jazz saxophone player. WordPress naming rights have been awarded to jazz legends such as Charles Mingus (v1.2), Billy Strayhorn (v1.5), Duke Ellington (v2.0), Michael Brecker (v2.5), John Coltrane (v2.7), Chet Baker (v2.8), Carmen McRae (v2.9), and Thelonius Monk (v3.0). ■

Later that year, WordPress released version 2.0, which was included by Debian Linux, a popular distribution of Linux. As such, version 2.0 continued to be maintained alongside more current versions. Version 2.0 adopted a complete rewrite of major core components of the code and provided a new “visual text editor” that has continued to see massive improvements since its initial inception. Version 2.0 became the cornerstone for every release until version 2.7 was released in 2008.

The WordPress ecosystem emerges

Over the next three years, WordPress added more features to their offering, including widget support, taxonomies, and two new updates to the back-end administrative interface. In addition, WordPress Multisite (formerly known as WordPress MU) came into play. WordPress Multisite enables bloggers to control multiple blogs from one installation. The most famous use of WordPress Multisite is WordPress.com.

Note

WordPress Multisite is not a separate product. Instead, it is a set of functionality that can be enabled in WordPress 3.0 or better. Prior to WordPress 3.0, Multisite capability was maintained in a separate version of WordPress known as WordPress MU.

Cross-Reference

WordPress 3.0 has undergone significant enhancements in the Multisite realm since the first release of this book. It is covered in detail in Chapter 22. ■

Beyond WordPress Multisite, other complementary software packages were produced to fill the holistic, and ever-growing, need for bloggers who were venturing into other aspects of Web 2.0. BuddyPress, a suite of plugins that adds social networking capabilities to a blog, became a wildly popular solution for WordPress-based social networks. bbPress provided a lightweight forum solution useful for building a community around a topic or site. The Akismet service was launched as a solution to fight the cancerous spam that existed around blogs. In addition, offline community events such as WordCamp (community-organized city and regional “unconferences” or loosely organized conference-like events) began to spring up, and WordPress user groups developed to support the extensive WordPress community.

The future of WordPress

For all intents and purposes, blogging and new media have become somewhat synonymous with WordPress and WordPress-based solutions. Active development continues as the road-map for the platform expands to meet the need of a changing demographic of bloggers and developers. The power of BuddyPress now enables every WordPress blog on the planet to become a self-contained social network.

With the advent of new Web technologies, adoption of HTML5-based themes are starting to bring a whole new world of user interfaces to theme designers. As PHP developers build solutions for the greater Web, the choice of WordPress as a framework for development might continue to expand the reach of the platform beyond blogs. Regardless of what the future holds, WordPress continues to take the lead in providing solutions for publishing on the Web.

Leveraging the WordPress Community

Undoubtedly, the WordPress community consists of a wide variety of people of varying skill levels. In fact, it is this diversity that makes the WordPress community one of the strongest and most vibrant communities on the Web. With mailing lists, support forums, thousands of blog posts with “how tos” using WordPress, and dozens of WordCamp events organized around the world every year, it’s clear that WordPress, unlike many other open source projects, has a self-sustaining community.

Though I talk more about the different venues of support that are part of the community later in this book, the mailing lists and forums tend to have the most WordPress activity.

Support

WordPress offers a number of different avenues of support for end users. Some are officially sanctioned and have the resources of the project behind them, while others serve as places where WordPress users gather “off the books.”

Support forums

The official Web-based location for support in a snap is the WordPress support forums at <http://wordpress.org/support/>. The support forums are staffed by volunteers and provide a way for users to ask questions and receive answers. The forums also enable users to search for other incidents that may help them through a problem.

Part I: Getting Started with WordPress

The WordPress Codex

The Codex, literally meaning “the ancient book of laws,” is a wiki that any WordPress user can use to document and provide instruction on WordPress usage. It provides example usage of template tags, plugin compatibility guides, and other instructions on how to use the WordPress software.

Note

A wiki is a collaborative piece of software that allows easy editing and managing of Web sites. The most widely known wiki is Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.org). ■

Caution

The WordPress Codex is community-driven and a continuous work-in-progress, so sometimes the organization of the Codex confuses users. ■

IRC

Internet Relay Chat (IRC) is one of the oldest forms of chat rooms. It is also highly favored by many development shops and software development groups. WordPress has an IRC room (<irc:irc.freenode.net/#wordpress>) that you can tap into for real-time support, as shown in Figure 1.2.

Tip

IRC can be difficult to use and understand, but many resources are available on the Internet to help you with commands. In order to use IRC, you will need an IRC client such as mIRC for Windows or Colloquy for Mac. ■

Development

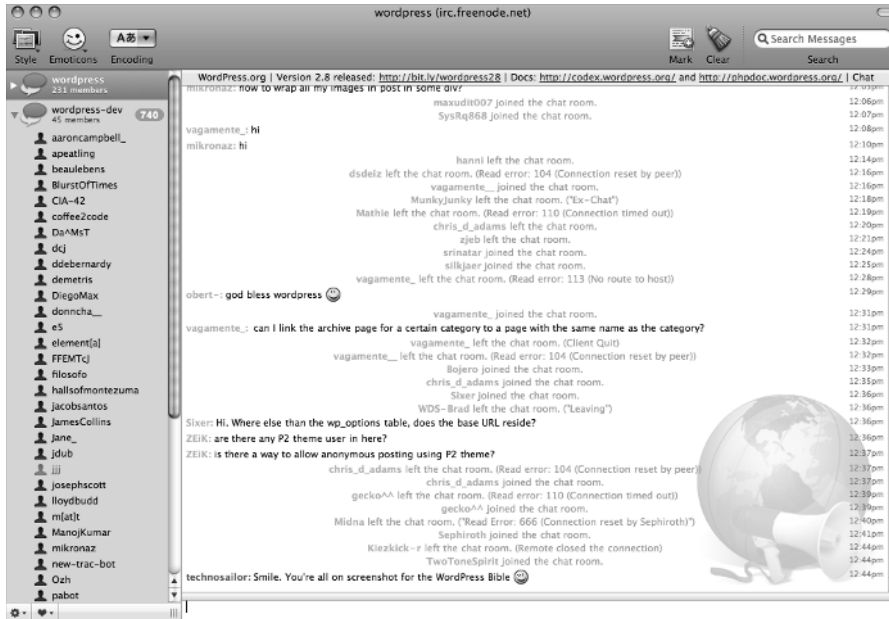
There is a constant swirling of activity with WordPress development. As soon as one release is launched, work to develop a new release, as well as fix bugs and address any security issues, begins. For those of you who are eager to be part of the continual progress of the software, there are more than a few ways to be involved.

Hackers mailing list

The “hackers” mailing list, also known as wp-hackers, is a great place for conversation on the development of the software. Unlike the more widely understood definition of hacker, the members of the WordPress hackers mailing list are coders that tinker with WordPress code to make it better and often contribute back to the community with patches and code. Often ideas surface on this mailing list before they show up anywhere else.

FIGURE 1.2

Colloquy for Mac is an IRC client that you can use to get real-time support in the #wordpress IRC chat room. mIRC is a Windows IRC client.



Testers mailing list

Similar to the hackers mailing list, the wp-testers list is where activity associated with development shifts leading up to a major release occurs. These individuals take WordPress and put it through extensive testing, including unit testing, to ensure it is ready for prime time.

Note

Unit testing is a type of testing that tries to isolate a function, class, or feature from the rest of the software and determine if it performs as it was designed and expected to do. Unit testing has been championed by several active WordPress users, but most vocally by Jacob Santos, a very active WordPress developer. ■

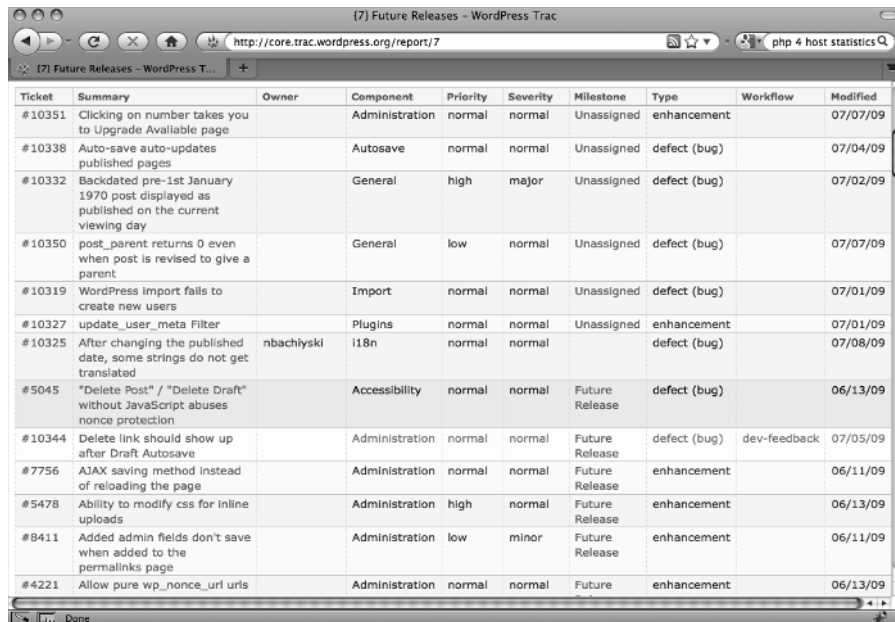
Trac

WordPress core developers and bug fixers rely on Trac, the WordPress bug-tracking system located at <http://core.trac.wordpress.org/> and shown in Figure 1.3, to keep track of bug reports and patches, consolidate decision-making conversations about features and bugs, and find out about changes made to the core software. Ultimately, any change to WordPress goes through Trac, making it an essential tool for anyone wanting to be involved in the development process.

Part I: Getting Started with WordPress

FIGURE 1.3

Trac is where all bug reports, changes, or major decision-making discussion goes during the core development cycle.



The screenshot shows a web browser window with the URL <http://core.trac.wordpress.org/report/7>. The page title is "[7] Future Releases - WordPress Trac". It displays a table of tickets with the following columns: Ticket, Summary, Owner, Component, Priority, Severity, Milestone, Type, Workflow, and Modified. The table lists several tickets, including #10351, #10338, #10332, #10350, #10319, #10327, #10325, #5045, #10344, #7756, #5478, #8411, and #4221.

Ticket	Summary	Owner	Component	Priority	Severity	Milestone	Type	Workflow	Modified
#10351	Clicking on number takes you to Upgrade Available page		Administration	normal	normal	Unassigned	enhancement		07/07/09
#10338	Auto-save auto-updates published pages		Autosave	normal	normal	Unassigned	defect (bug)		07/04/09
#10332	Backdated pre-1st January 1970 post displayed as published on the current viewing day		General	high	major	Unassigned	defect (bug)		07/02/09
#10350	post_parent returns 0 even when post is revised to give a parent		General	low	normal	Unassigned	defect (bug)		07/07/09
#10319	WordPress import fails to create new users		Import	normal	normal	Unassigned	defect (bug)		07/01/09
#10327	update_user_meta Filter		Plugins	normal	normal	Unassigned	enhancement		07/01/09
#10325	After changing the published date, some strings do not get translated	nbachliski	i18n	normal	normal		defect (bug)		07/08/09
#5045	"Delete Post" / "Delete Draft" without JavaScript abuses nonce protection		Accessibility	normal	normal	Future Release	defect (bug)		06/13/09
#10344	Delete link should show up after Draft Autosave		Administration	normal	normal	Future Release	defect (bug)	dev-feedback	07/05/09
#7756	AJAX saving method instead of reloading the page		Administration	normal	normal	Future Release	enhancement		06/11/09
#5478	Ability to modify css for inline uploads		Administration	high	normal	Future Release	enhancement		06/13/09
#8411	Added admin fields don't save when added to the permalinks page		Administration	low	minor	Future Release	enhancement		06/11/09
#4221	Allow pure wp_nonce_url urls		Administration	normal	normal	Future	enhancement		06/13/09

WordPress by the Numbers

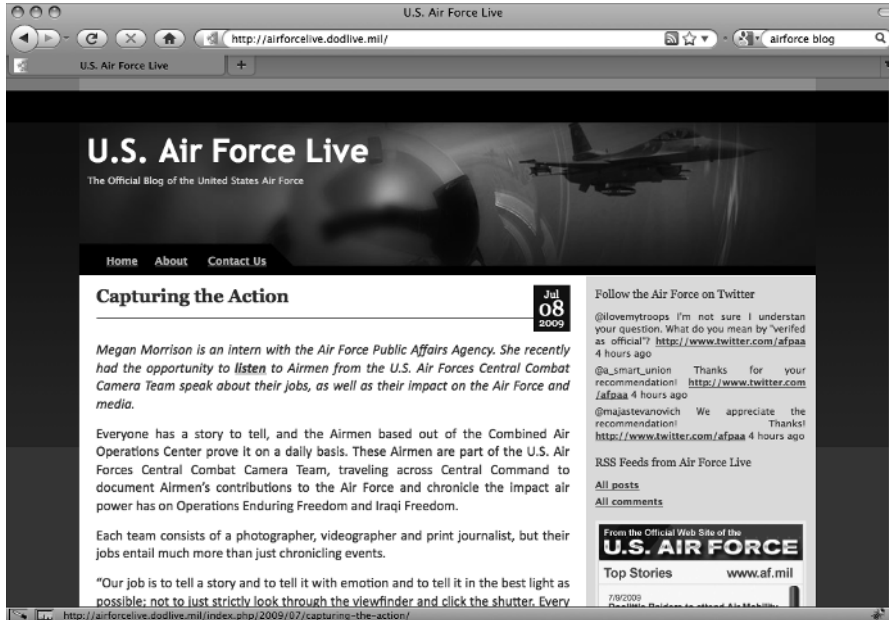
WordPress, as with any software, has competition. While it is superior in many ways, there is also a constant “war for the hearts and minds” of bloggers. At the end of the day, the philosophy behind the development of the software is to create a product that effectively disappears and enables bloggers to create the content. However, it would be remiss to not pay attention to the numbers behind this amazing software.

The top blogs, as listed by Technorati, one of the earliest and most well-known blog search and discovery sites, run a smattering of different platforms. Among these many blogs, almost one out of every three is WordPress-powered. WordPress.com powers more than 50 blogs for CNN and also runs blogs at Dow Jones, the *New York Times*, *People* magazine, Fox News, and the *Wall Street Journal*.

Even the United States federal government has gotten in on the game. With the newfound adoption of all forms of social media within the halls of the government, it's not surprising that many agencies have made WordPress their blog platform of choice. In fact, recent rule changes for the U.S. Federal Government, has allowed other agencies to start considering it for their blogging purposes. See Figure 1.4.

FIGURE 1.4

The official blog of the U.S. Air Force (<http://airforcelive.dodlive.mil/>), powered by WordPress



At WordCamp San Francisco 2009, Matt Mullenweg presented statistics on the ecosystem surrounding WordPress. The numbers, in some cases, are staggering and continue to grow:

- 2,700+ commits (changes) to the software since the last major release
- 14.5 million+ downloads of WordPress 3.0
- 12.7 million+ WordPress.org self-hosted blogs
- 3.5 million+ WordPress.com blogs
- 60 million+ new WordPress.com posts
- 22 billion+ page views on WordPress.org and WordPress.com
- 1,220+ themes in the *WordPress Theme Directory*
- 11,000+ plugins in the *WordPress Plugin Directory*
- 18 billion+ spam comments blocked by Akismet

In addition, 42 percent of all WordPress downloads are from non-English speaking countries.

Ten Things You Need to Know About WordPress

There are many benefits to using WordPress and I'll cover a significant amount in this book. Some will only be beneficial to plugin developers, while others exist purely as workflow enhancers for content producers.

Historically, on my own site, <http://technosailor.com>, I release a regular “10 Things You Need to Know About WordPress” article for every major new release. These articles serve as a snapshot of the new release and a quick reference of what is in it. Although the following list is not release-specific, its purpose is the same — to provide a snapshot of what you should expect from WordPress, both from a user and a developer perspective.

Generate content with an offline editor

Sometimes it's just easier, depending on your workflow and habits, to write blog posts in an environment that is more familiar to you. Notably, many people prefer to write blog posts offline and publish from those applications. By doing so, they are using one of two technologies: XML-RPC (XML Remote Procedure Call) or AtomPub (formerly known as APP, or Atom Publishing Protocol). Offline editors send content to WordPress using standardized protocols that WordPress supports.

Sometimes, particularly with older versions of WordPress, this feature becomes a security problem that hackers can exploit. Under the assumption that most people don't need to publish remotely, the option is not enabled. If you need to publish remotely, you can enable XML-RPC publishing in the Writing Options portion of the WordPress administrative interface, as shown in Figure 1.5.

Note

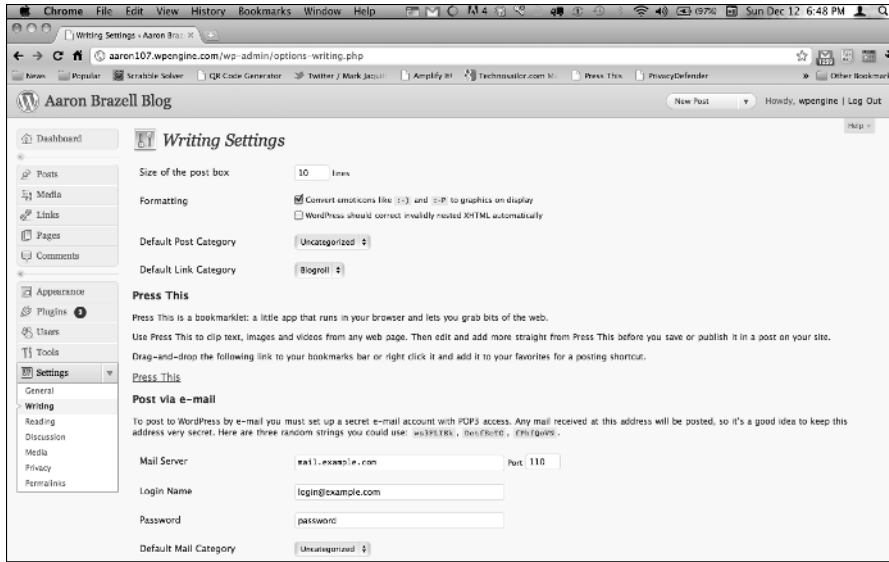
Many offline editors do not use the APP at this time. The APP is a standardized format for data portability and has been adopted by major vendors such as Google. WordPress joined other publishing platform vendors in 2007 by incorporating APP in WordPress 2.3. ■

Cross-Reference

The XML-RPC and the Atom Publishing Protocol are discussed in more detail in Chapter 15. ■

FIGURE 1.5

In most cases, you only need to enable XML-RPC but sometimes you might need to enable the Atom Publishing Protocol as well.



Benefit from built-in SEO features

Search engine optimization, or SEO, a multi-billion dollar industry in itself, is a primary concern for bloggers looking to create a presence beyond simple friends and family reach. For example, being listed in Google can make or break a company's chance of making money or closing business online.

A key consideration in SEO is canonical URLs. *Canonical URLs* cause headaches for many administrators because Google, and other search engines, consider a domain starting with www as a different site than the same domain without www. Having a single site answer identically for both variants can easily be reflected the same way in the search engines. However, when search engines think there are two copies of the same page, they can penalize one as duplicate content, or at the very least, create a situation where two "versions" of your site are competing against each other in search engines. A canonical URL is the favored URL for accessing a certain Web page when multiple options exist.

Part I: Getting Started with WordPress

Cross-Reference

SEO is an exhaustive topic of its own. The SEO ramifications and how WordPress helps in social media marketing is discussed in Chapter 3. ■

Fortunately, WordPress considers this and protects against duplicate content with canonical URL support. Based on what you set the blog address to in the site options, as illustrated in Figure 1.6, WordPress redirects content to the proper location.

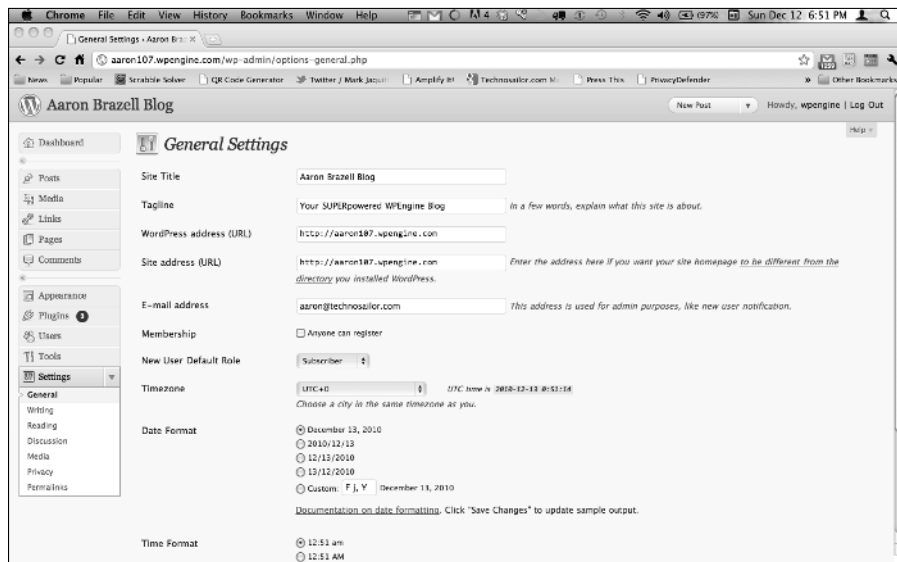
Widgetize your blog for a unique experience

It's too much work to have to manually hack code to reconfigure the way a blog sidebar appears. Fortunately, WordPress has an integrated *widget* system that enables you to reconfigure how portions of a blog (typically a sidebar, but potentially a footer or other portion of a theme layout) appear to readers. Simply drag and drop widgets into position on a blog, as shown in Figure 1.7, and instantly, you have a different look.

WordPress comes with a default set of widgets that include common features such as a Search form, recent comments from readers, recent posts, an RSS widget to parse out feeds from other places, and even a plain text box to deploy virtually anything else. Many plugins provide their own custom widgets, as well.

FIGURE 1.6

WordPress provides canonical URL support based on how you set your site address, and helps you avoid duplicate content penalties from search engines.



Cross-Reference

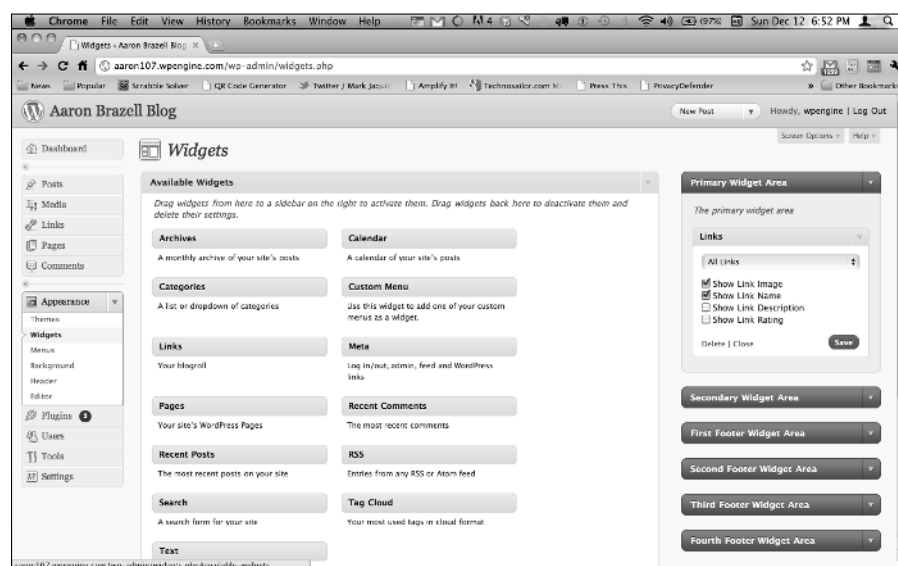
Widgets are discussed more in Chapter 6. ■

Note

You can also use widgets on the WordPress Admin Dashboard. These widgets differ from sidebar widgets but are used much the same way. I talk about those in Chapter 5. ■

FIGURE 1.7

Drag and drop available widgets to different locations in the sidebar boxes to render an entirely different look and feel to your blog.



Install themes, plugins, and core upgrades automatically

A few years ago, the only way to reliably add functionality and new themes, or upgrade WordPress was via file transfer protocol (FTP). Many users were frightened by FTP because they didn't understand how or why it should be used. They heard horror stories about files being accidentally overwritten or file permissions being changed.

In WordPress 2.6, functionality was added to upgrade plugins from within WordPress itself. In WordPress 2.7, that feature was extended to allow for one-click upgrades of the core WordPress software itself. Currently, you can add new plugins and themes and upgrade those as updates become available.

Cross-Reference

Auto-upgrades, security concerns, and system requirements are discussed in more detail in Chapters 16 and 18. ■

Turn your blog into a social network

When WordPress was initially created, it was all about blogging. There was very little you could do with it beyond that. When WordPress 1.5 was released, the introduction of Pages meant that you could now use WordPress not only for a blog, but also as a content management system. With the advent of Galleries in WordPress 2.5, you could take your site run on WordPress as a content management system and add photo galleries and features typically provided from a photo-sharing service such as Flickr.

Today, with the addition of BuddyPress to the WordPress universe, it is now possible to turn WordPress — which already has pages, galleries, and more — into a social network with private messaging, profiles, and journals.

Cross-Reference

BuddyPress was finally launched on April 30, 2009, as BuddyPress 1.0. At the time of the writing of this book, it is at version 1.2.5.2 and supports WordPress in standalone and Multisite mode. BuddyPress solutions are discussed in more detail in Chapter 24. ■

Extend WordPress with plugins

WordPress was always built to be extremely extensible. This explains almost 11,000 plugins being tracked in the WordPress plugin repository. Because of the open source nature of the software, developers love to build upon it and make it better.

The WordPress hook system is robust, and if there's one thing the WordPress core developers spared no expense on, it's hooks. WordPress 3.0 has more than 1,800 filter hooks and almost 900 action hooks. There's certainly some way to play around.

Cross-Reference

See Part II for more information about hooks and Appendix A for a full hook reference. ■

Provide context with the WordPress taxonomies

With WordPress, metadata is everything. *Metadata* is best described as data that describes other data and it is essential for the growth of the organic Web. Discovery, exploration, and sharing are all principles that are important to end users. With it, users discover new content, explore blogs and social networks, and share that content with their friends and colleagues.

WordPress makes it easy to discover content with tags and categories. Bloggers can tag many things in WordPress (such as posts, images, and links), making them instantly discoverable.

In addition to discoverability, this kind of metadata can also provide a helpful aid in providing structure to a blog. For example, many bloggers choose to use tags as metadata and utilize categories to provide site structure and navigation elements. Link tags and categories can provide a useful hierarchy for blogrolls — lists of blogs maintained by bloggers as blogs they read or recommend — or separate groups of links entirely.

Import your blog from any platform

With the popularity of WordPress, it is not uncommon for bloggers to want to switch to the platform. Often, new bloggers begin on another platform unaware of the benefits of WordPress. Other times, bloggers build entire communities around a site and feel locked into the platform, even though they want to use WordPress. Fortunately, WordPress makes a large number of importers available via plugin to assist in the migration of WordPress.

Importers exist for the following platforms:

- Blogger
- Blogware
- DotClear
- GreyMatter
- LiveJournal
- MovableType/TypePad
- RSS feeds
- Textpattern
- Other WordPress/WordPress.com blogs

Additionally, WordPress provides a number of import utilities for tags from a variety of WordPress tagging plugins, OPML/Blogroll importer and, if you're coming from an early version of WordPress (prior to WordPress 2.3), a category-to-tag importer.

Take advantage of multiple feeds

Most blogging platforms give you a single feed. You can't get comment feeds. Search feeds don't exist. Subscribing to a feed for only a single category is impossible. Fortunately for readers of WordPress blogs, feeds exist everywhere.

In addition to feeds being provided throughout the WordPress software, a variety of types of feeds are also available. Though the default is RSS 2.0, WordPress also supports Atom 1.0, RSS 0.92, and RDF feeds, making syndication possibilities endless.

Make WordPress a full-fledged CMS with custom post types

In WordPress 2.9, great strides were made with the addition of custom post types. But really, these were not fully baked until the release of WordPress 3.0 where API was added and the functionality was really fleshed out.

Where WordPress maintained adequacy in the CMS market, particularly for smaller sites, it quickly became an option for bigger sites with WordPress 3.0. Developers can now support custom post types (or more accurately, custom content types) such as podcasts, video clips, or any other type of media. This is further enhanced with custom taxonomies so that new content can have tag-like or category-like metadata specifically for use in these special contexts.

Cross-Reference

WordPress custom post types and taxonomies are discussed in greater detail, including developer documentation, in Chapter 5.

Generate navigation menus on the fly with no coding required

Leveraging the concept of custom post types, WordPress 3.0 also provides a feature that has been met very positively by the WordPress community – Navigation Menus. Inside of WordPress, it is now possible to create complex nested menu systems by simply dragging and dropping navigation items, in much the same way that the WordPress widget management works.

Cross-Reference

The navigation and menu elements of WordPress 3.0 are discussed further in Chapter 6.

Understanding Open Source and the General Public License

Open source is the cornerstone of WordPress and the WordPress community. Specifically, the General Public License (GPL) guides the principles surrounding WordPress development. The GPL has three versions. WordPress can be redistributed under GPL version 2 or later.

The nice thing about the GPL is that it protects the freedom needed for open source software to grow and thrive. It protects the freedom to take, redistribute, reinvent, expand, or create

derivative work and enables users to have the peace of mind that they can do anything they like with the software as long as they, too, protect those interests. Many people mistake that aspect of free with the monetary aspect of free and automatically assume that free software means no money has to exchange hands. On the contrary, GPL software can be sold but it cannot be sold with stipulations that the end user can't redistribute or reinvent it.

This concept of free enabled WordPress to be created in the first place, and it has allowed a few projects over the years to use the WordPress software to create commercial applications.

With the GPL's standard disclaimer that matters of legal weight should be referred to an attorney, it is important to understand the guiding principles behind WordPress. WordPress was created because the original blog software, b2/cafeblog, was available as GPL'd software. If it had not been, it would be impossible to adopt the code base, improve it, and redistribute it.

Open source, and GPL specifically, does not necessarily mean *free*. Although WordPress is distributed for free, as are most GPL software products, the monetary definition of free is not applicable. GPL does require that the code used to build the software be included with the distribution of the software.

Cross-Reference

The entire GPL version 2 is included in Appendix G. ■

The common wisdom seems to be that any work that is a derivative of a GPL-protected work must also bear a license that is GPL compatible. A recent dustup within the WordPress community surrounded themes and licensing restrictions. Automattic, the proprietor of WordPress, asked for a legal interpretation of the GPL from lawyers at the Software Freedom Law Center, and received an opinion that interpreted that the GPL applies to any code, including the PHP portion of WordPress themes, that utilizes "derivative works of the WordPress Software":

When WordPress is started, it executes various routines that prepare information for use by themes. In normal use, control is then transferred via PHP's `include()` function to HTML and PHP templates found in theme package files. The PHP code in those template files relies on the earlier-prepared information to fill the templates for serving to the client.

In the WordPress themes, CSS [Cascading Style Sheet] files and images exist purely as data to be served by a Web server. WordPress itself ignores these files. The CSS and image files are simply read by the server as data and delivered verbatim to the user, avoiding the WordPress instance altogether. The CSS and images could easily be used with a range of HTML documents and read and displayed by a variety of software having no relation to WordPress. As such, these files are separate works from the WordPress code itself.

How TiVo Changed Open Source

A few years ago, the first major non-judicial challenge came to the GPL (now called the GPLv2). TiVo, with its famous Digital Video Recorder (DVR) system, used an embedded version of Linux, an open source operating system licensed under GPL. For the sake of efficiency and cost reduction, this made the most sense.

The hardware used in TiVo boxes, however, was not open source and impeded the ability for users to compile and produce their own Linux software for use with the TiVo machines. The Free Software Foundation, proprietors of the GPL, found this utilization of GPL too restrictive on the users the GPL protected code was distributed to.

Advocates of the GPL suggested that developers should be able to distribute GPL code without giving away the keys to the kingdom, suggesting that distribution of GPL code that relied on non-GPL code, software, or hardware, was completely a legitimate use of the license.

The Free Software Foundation disagreed stating that in order for code to be protected under GPL, it must not rely or utilize derivative benefit from non GPL-compatible code. GPLv3 was born, with an emphasis on benefit to the end user.

The PHP elements, taken together, are clearly derivative of WordPress code. The template is loaded via the `include()` function. Its contents are combined with the WordPress code in memory to be processed by PHP along with (and completely indistinguishable from) the rest of WordPress. The PHP code consists largely of calls to WordPress functions and sparse, minimal logic to control which WordPress functions are accessed and how many times they will be called. They are derivative of WordPress because every part of them is determined by the content of the WordPress functions they call. As works of authorship, they are designed only to be combined with WordPress into a larger work.

However, there has never been a legal decision on GPL, so it continues to be a license that has not been tested in court. That said, it has been presumed to be a rock solid legal license for many years and will continue to be for many years to come.

The company culture of Automattic is that it will only support 100 percent GPL-compatible software. The core of all the software that is distributable (excluding service-oriented projects like PollDaddy) via WordPress.org is completely GPL. This includes WordPress, WordPress MU, bbPress, Intense Debate, BuddyPress, as well as the WordPress iPhone and BlackBerry applications.

Despite the quote from legal sources, Automattic has decided not to host anything on WordPress that is not 100 percent compatible. For theme authors, that means all CSS, image, and non-WordPress dependent inclusions must also be GPL.

Since the writing of the last edition of this book, further clarification and understanding (as well as guidelines) have been placed around WordPress in the interest of protecting the interpreted meaning of the GPL as it pertains to WordPress.

The WordPress Foundation was established in January, 2010 with the purpose of providing oversight of WordPress trademarks and WordCamp guidelines. As a result, GPL compatibility is enforced as it pertains to the use of the WordPress logo, speakers, sponsors, and content provided at WordCamps around the world, and the endorsement of products and companies.

For example, it has been stated that it is the position of the WordPress Foundation that to be “GPL compliant” in a legal sense, there should be strict adherence to the SFLC interpretation above – that all PHP code included in a plugin or theme should be released under a GPLv2 compliant license, but that images, CSS and other “non-linked” files could be licensed under a differing license. While this is strictly legal, endorsement of products, plugins and themes will only be provided when the entire product is released in a GPL-compliant manner.

Most of the premium products in existence at the time of this book have adopted license structures that are partially, if not completely completely GPL-compliant. However, there is still a lot of debate in the community as to whether this is the proper position, and the final say may not come until there is a final court ruling on the matter.

Summary

- WordPress was created from a fork of b2/evolution in 2004.
- The WordPress ecosystem, including BuddyPress, WordPress MU, and bbPress, sprung up around WordPress.
- WordPress has had many iterations and improvements since it was launched in 2004.
- The WordPress support community includes mailing lists, forums, and online documentation.
- Developers of WordPress can tap into IRC, mailing lists, and the vast array of existing plugins to aid in their development.
- WordPress statistics are massive. Uptake by the U.S. government and major media puts the rubber stamp of approval on the WordPress project.

