

# THE PERCEIVED FRESHNESS FETISH <sup>NEW</sup>

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I look at my blog daily, maybe even several times a day. I don't visit it to check if it's still there. I am quite sure it is still where I put it and I have enough confidence in my hosting company that it is there for anyone to see. I do it because it is part of my daily routine. When I turn on my computer my e-mail program and browser are loaded on startup. After reading my e-mail and my RSS subscriptions I look at my blog statistics. After viewing the stats, I check my comments in moderation, view my blog, check MyBlogLog readers in the sidebar, visit unknown readers and scroll back to the top of my page. This is my daily routine which ends with a confrontation with my latest post.

When I am confronted with my latest post the postdate immediately catches my eye. It always seems to tell me that it is time to write a new post, that it has been x days since I wrote my last post. It implicitly tells me I have not written for an x number of days. Why do I feel that I need to blog daily? There seems to be some kind of consensus or norm in the blogosphere that blogs should be updated daily. Several blogs about blogging recommend posting daily and blog search engine Technorati's rankings are correlated to a blog its freshness. There is both an internal and an external "perceived freshness fetish" (Rogers, 2007) in the blogosphere. The internal freshness fetish could be described as a wish, a personal demand or a wanting to blog daily. The external freshness fetish could be described as a requirement by external parties like Google and Technorati to blog daily to achieve a certain ranking. This external freshness fetish is further imposed by using ping techniques to let services such as Technorati know that you have updated your blog.

This essay deals with the phenomenon of the perceived freshness fetish, the automation of this freshness and the common habit of apologizing for a lack of freshness. I will argue that this freshness fetish is not new to blogs but that it has existed ever since the World Wide Web became popular. The web is often referred to as an open construction which is dynamic, ever expanding and never finished. With the increasing popularity of the Live (dynamic) web we can see the freshness fetish represented in the history of the web in the use of under construction signs, last updated scripts, pinging services, blog apologies and Twitter. This representation in history is not meant as a teleological narrative with Twitter as the ultimate example of

the perceived freshness fetish. It rather serves as an illustration of the phenomenon because there is no implicit causal finality in the account of freshness.

First I will discuss the issue of freshness in the early Static Web which

we understand and describe [...] in terms of real estate. It has "sites" with "addresses" and "locations" in "domains" we "develop" with the help of "architects", "designers" and "builders". Like homes and office buildings, our sites have "visitors" unless, of course, they are "under construction". (Searls, 2005)

In the early days of the Web freshness was indicated by manually inserting an “under construction” sign. Javascript automated this indication of fresh content in the Static Web. Blogging would change our perception of freshness with the coming of the Live Web that

is defined by standards and practices that were nowhere in sight when Tim Berners-Lee was thinking up the Web [...] These standards and practices are about time and people, rather than about sites and content. Of course blogs still look like sites and content to the static Web search engines, but to see blogs in static terms is to miss something fundamentally different about them: they are alive. Their live nature, and their humanity, defines the *live* Web. (Searls, 2005)

Then I will argue that there are internal and external blogging forces that contribute to the perceived freshness fetish. These forces consist of both human and technological factors that have a very subtle and entangled relationship. This will be illustrated with the case study of “Vitalizing Dead Blogs” which also points to the live nature and humanity of blogs. Finally I will address the issue of Continuous Partial Presence; the consequence of our desire to be continuously connected with and be a part of the live network which is visible in social networking sites such as Twitter.

## The Web Under Construction

With the development of the Mosaic browser in 1993 and the Netscape Navigator browser in 1994 the World Wide Web became very popular. Companies and individuals were in a rush to get online to make their presence known on the World Wide Web. In this rush it was very common for websites to explicitly state that they were unfinished. These websites would bear an “under construction” sign in the form of an animated gif or banner (Fig. 1) to indicate that the website had not been finished yet but that the webmaster was still working on it. Particularly personal homepages showed these banners as people experimented with learning HTML and building websites and they wanted to show what had been made or was ready.

The use of these images was often regarded as unprofessional, unnecessary and intruding and actually led to the People Against Under Construction Images

movement<sup>1</sup>. The signs use the metaphor of a road under construction where road workers place an “under construction” notice at the beginning of the road to inform passing traffic. This metaphor may be traced back to how people perceived the World Wide Web in its early days. It cannot be directly linked to the wish of constructing an Information Superhighway “a now-obsolete term that was popularized in the early 1990s by the Clinton-Gore administration to describe ways of expanding the Internet beyond its then-current state.” (Wikipedia, Information Superhighway, 2007) as it concerned itself mainly with the infrastructure of the Internet. More likely, these signs point to the open nature of the web where nothing ever seems to be finished:

Especially in a virtual medium one may reselect and rearrange elements until a pattern emerges which seems to satisfy the constraints of the task and the current purposes of the user. Indeed, no version of the resulting text need be regarded as final – completion may be endlessly deferred in the medium in which everything is always ‘under construction’. (Chandler, 2000)

Chandler sees personal homepages not only as a form of *bricolage*, the appropriation of materials such as images and text, but also as a construction of the *bricoleur's* identity. The “under construction” signs could be interpreted as the homepage author's idea that the homepage can be finished whole. The signs were often accompanied by a text stating “this website is under construction, please come back later” where “later” the visitor would be presented with the “whole” and “finished” website.

If the visitor was later confronted with a website that was no longer under construction it did not necessarily mean it had been finished. A website could retain its look for a few weeks, months or even years but very likely items had been added, removed or changed. Early web pages were static web pages which is a type of web page “that always comprises the same information in response to *all* download requests from *all* users.” (Wikipedia, Static Web Page, 2007). To indicate an update or change the  image came into existence and was widely used to point at new content on a website<sup>2</sup>. With the advent of Javascript in 1995 these images were soon accompanied by scripts indicating when the content of a website had been last updated:

The use of “under construction” phrases and icons on the World Wide Web has become an almost comical cliché; in reality, everything on the Web changes constantly or quickly becomes obsolete. Inevitably, making all these changes becomes tiresome. As a result, savvy designers, wearing their construction hard

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1 The People Against Under Construction Images movement was initiated by Nifty Rifty in 1997. It was meant as a form of satire against the popular use of the under construction images but the petition was signed by over a hundred people within a few months. There are numerous other pages that rant about the use of under construction images including:

- [Things I hate](#)
- [Under Construction, Or, "This icon says more about me than it does about my web page"](#)
- [Under Construction \(well, not really...\)](#)

2 More information on the origin and history of the new image can be found on “[The Original new.gif Tribute Page at Kevdo.com](#)”

hats, search for ways to automate the work. Script languages meet this need. (Buyens, 2003, p. 1053)

Javascript enables a more dynamic kind of webpage where the visitor is confronted with an automatically configured indication of freshness.

## Last Updated JavaScript

A common way to indicate the latest update of your webpage used to be to insert a Javascript showing the date and time of the last update (see Fig. 2). This script used to be a very common way to notify your readers when your page was last updated<sup>3</sup>.

However, the script does not always adequately denote the freshness of the page as happened with Geocities members' pages in 1998. Geocities was one of the first web hosting services to supply a limited amount of webspace to create free home pages. In exchange for a mandatory advertisement link back to the Geocities homepage the services were free and quickly became very popular. In 1998 the mandatory link was replaced with a floating transparent gif image that functioned as a watermark. It was automatically inserted into every page in the bottom right corner using JavaScript which caused a number of problems such as browser compatibility and markup clashes (Hu, 1998). The JavaScript also interfered with the Last Modified JavaScript because whenever a page was loaded, the image was inserted into the webpage. This would cause the JavaScript to interpret that the page had been uploaded at the moment a visitor would request the document thus displaying the current date and time as the last update to the website. After various protests from Geocities users the image was eventually removed and replaced by ads in a separate frame on the right side.

The last updated scripts were used to inform the website's audience if and when the webpage had been updated. The script only indicates the freshness of the page it is placed in and not the underlying pages. This could lead to an index page that had been last updated a year ago while the content of the underlying pages had been updated only a few days ago. The “new” image was often used in combination with the Javascript on the main page to show which sections of the website had been updated. Blogs would change this by always showing the latest item first.

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3 One of the many ways to use JavaScript to indicate the last update of a site:  
`<script language="JavaScript"> <!--//hide script from old browsers  
document.write( "Last updated "+ document.lastModified );  
//end hiding contents ---> </script>`

## Blogs

Justin Hall started blogging at links.net in 1996 which makes him one of the first bloggers<sup>4</sup>. In his very first blog entry he states that he will add something *new* to his site *daily*:

January 10, 1996

daily thoughts, a useful notion  
I met again the two guys who run [suck.com](http://suck.com)  
again last night  
at a Wired anniversary party  
both pleasant misanthropists  
typical, Joey said he used to love my pages  
but now there's too many layers to my links

at suck, you get sucked immediately, no layers to content.  
they're urging folks to make it their homepage  
(it changes daily)

sounds like a good idea to me,  
I think I'm gonna have a little somethin' new  
at the top of [www.links.net](http://www.links.net)  
every day. (Hall, 1996)

Justin Hall talks about the removal of layers to content that urges people to go to a homepage. If the newest items are always placed on top you are immediately sucked into the content and you do not have to search for recently added items. Early blogs were either link lists or diaries but they shared the same format of “frequently updated, reverse-chronological entries on a single Web page.” (Blood, 2004, p. 53) Blog software automated the process of producing a blog entry and embedded the format of the reverse-chronological order into the software's core. (Helmond, forthcoming)

This raises questions such as whether a blog is as good as its latest entry and whether the freshness of a page is more important than its content. Nowadays we often do not visit websites and blogs through the main index page by entering the URL but rather through search engines and feed readers. If we visit a website or blog through a search engine or a feed reader we are more likely to enter the website through a specific page rather than through the front page. Only regular readers are likely to enter a website through the main index page, but most visitors will enter a website through a search query or referral. For my personal blog 14,87% of the visitors are (returning) regular visitors while 85,13% are new visitors. My blog is reached directly by 9,34% of the visitors, through referral sites by 18,31% of the visitors and through search engines by 72,35% of the visitors. Almost three quarters of my blog visitors find it through

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<sup>4</sup> Justin Hall's blog is an example of an early diary blog. Jorn Barger is famous for his link list weblog *Robot Wisdom*, started in 1997, where he “logged” the web with interesting links and commentary.

search engines. The most popular page and at the same time my top landing page is a post titled '[WordPress Photoblog Themes](#)' which is a post of nearly two months old. It is found and accessed through search engines mainly as “wordpress photoblog theme” which is my top search string that leads to that post. The second most popular page and the second top landing page is my main index page; as retrieved from Google Analytics on the 6<sup>th</sup> June 2007. These statistics indicate that my blog is not necessarily as good as its latest post.

## External Blogging Forces

So why do we feel the need to update our blog every single day? Is there something in the blog software that makes you want to update your blog every single day? At the first glance there seems to be no technological drive in the blog software that forces you to write daily. Your login is not disabled after having been idle for a certain amount of time unlike a Hotmail account that used to expire after thirty days of inactivity. However, blog software does seem to influence the amount of words of a single post and the frequency of posting as Tom Coates noted in 2004 after five years of blogging:

You may well ask what it was that caused my post-length to go up and my post frequency to drop so dramatically? Well it turns out, looking at my archives, that this happens at precisely the same time as I switched to using Movable Type instead of Blogger - which just goes to show how much the tool helps dictate the form of your writing online. (Coates, Three More, 2004)

In 2004 Coates put up his entire blog archive in a text file for people to download and analyze (Coates, Five Years, 2004). As Coates was an established top 100 blogger in those days the data collected over a period of five years might contain significant value about (his) early blogging habits. One of the things that stood out in several visualizations was the change in posting habits on Plasticbag.org after Coates switched from Blogger to Moveable Type in 2003. He does not directly offer an explanation for this change but

Matt has suggested to me in the past that another equally convincing model might be to think of MT as having broken the paradigm of incredibly fast and easy informal peer-to-peer publishing that Blogger created and was initially its USP. (Coates, Three More, 2004)

Neil Turner, who has been blogging since 2002, also noticed a change in posting frequency after he switched from Blogger to Movable type. Unlike Tom Coates whose posting frequency dropped after the switch Turner's posting frequency slightly increased. Such changes may also be related to external factors such as work but in her 2005 research on blog motivations Dan Li hints at different posting behavior caused by

different kinds of blog software:

It is worth mentioning that a negative relationship exists between the efforts required to update a blog and the frequency of updating. Simply put, the easier it is for bloggers to post entries to blog, the more likely they will do it. (Dan Li, 2005, p. 28)

If we take a glance at the different blog platforms and software available it is immediately obvious that some interfaces for writing posts are much more complicated and cluttered than others. Blogger's interface looks clean and does not offer many options besides writing a post. The focus of the screen is on the writing area itself which is only thirteen lines long. WordPress' and Movable Type's interfaces look much more complicated and are less concentrated on the actual writing area than Blogger's interface (see Fig. 3, 4 and 5). It requires further research to see whether different blogging platforms/interfaces encourage or discourage different kinds of blogging behavior including frequency<sup>5</sup>.

There are also other external technological forces that drive or enforce you to update daily. These forces are meta blogs, blog search and indexing engines such as Technorati, BlogPulse and Google Blog Search. Google recently launched Google Blog Search which searches the Live Web in contrast to Google Search which is mainly used for the Static Web. Google Search also includes results from blogs (the Live Web) and there seems to be an increasing importance of freshness in ranking results. Google Search uses the PageRank algorithm as one of the many factors to determine the authority of a website by looking at the number of (external) links that point to it. An early patent filed in 1995 by Google employees shows that freshness is part of Google's search algorithm (Jon, 2007):

26. The method of claim 1, wherein the one or more types of history data includes information relating to freshness of links; and wherein the generating a score includes: determining freshness of links associated with the document, assigning weights to the links based on the determined freshness, and scoring the document based, at least in part, on the weights assigned to the links associated with the document. (United States Patent Application: 0050071741, 2005)

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5 The front end of blogging has been widely studied in several contexts such as: the blogosphere as a new public sphere, blogging as a new kind of journalism, remediation: the blog as a new kind of diary and private versus public personal publishing. The back end of the blog and the relationship between the blog software and the database have hardly been addressed until now. It is important to study the back end because it contributes to how the front end looks and is perceived. However, software is more than a tool that constructs an object (in this case the blog). Software are not merely tools

but also the paths between them, how they intermix, and the boundaries and correlations between their different functions, the objects they work on and the users that they amalgamate with. (Fuller, Behind the Blip, p. 138)

In current research the emphasis has been mainly on the social aspects of blogging and little has been written about the technical aspects of blogging. This thesis strives to contribute to the understanding of blogging by focusing on the technical aspects of blogging and connect them with the social aspects of blogging. (Helmond, MA Thesis, forthcoming)

Rebecca Blood first addressed blog software in her 2004 essay on 'How Blogging Software Reshapes the Online Community.' Du and Wagner explored the role of blog software in their 2006 research on 'Weblog success: Exploring the role of technology.' My upcoming MA thesis wishes to further contribute to this existing research on blog software.

The original PageRank document also mentions update frequency as one of the many factors that contribute to a page's ranking (Brin & Page, 1998, p. 6). Freshness may also be a factor in crawling as a page that has been updated frequently will be crawled more often (Rowse, 2005). However, freshness is only one of the many factors that is used to calculate the popularity of a site and does not automatically improve a site's PageRank (Smashing Magazine, 2007). Google's algorithm is a black box because its methods for ranking a site's authority has not been published. However, it has been agreed upon that over the past six months the importance of freshness has increased (Boggs, 2007). This is confirmed by Amit Singhal, head of Google's search quality team, in a recent New York Times article about Google's constant tweaking of the algorithm to retain quality:

For much of the second half of last year, one of the recurring items was “freshness.” Freshness, which describes how many recently created or changed pages are included in a search result, is at the center of a constant debate in search. (Hansell, 2007)

This increasing focus on freshness has led to the fact that Google recently

introduced a value called QDF for “query deserves freshness,” because it turned out that one recent important, and more general issue, was that some new web pages were vastly under-valued in rankings. However, it also turned out that the algo couldn't be just tweaked to simply emphasize fresher pages, because that would've harmed placement of older authority pages in other cases where the user might not want the new page. So Amit and his team looked into different ways to tackle the issue, QDF being one of the measurements trying to determine just what the searcher wants, by e.g. looking at how much a specific topic is currently discussed by blogs (or by checking how often the topic is searched for in Google at the time, similar to what Google shows us as Hot Trends, I guess). (Lenssen, 2007)

A third important external force is the pinging feature to let the previously mentioned services know that you have updated your blog:

Update Services are tools you can use to let other people know you've updated your blog. WordPress automatically notifies popular Update Services that you've updated your blog by sending a XML-RPC (<http://www.xmlrpc.com/>) ping each time you create or update a post. In turn, Update Services process the ping and updates their proprietary indices with your update. Now people browsing sites like Technorati or DayPop can find your most recent posts! (WordPress, 2007)

Once you have pinged a blog search engine such as Technorati it will crawl your website and include the latest update in its index. This is different from a website search engine such as Google Search that indexes websites “regularly” (Google, Webmaster Help Center, 2007). So blog updates are indexed almost immediately in contrast to websites that are indexed “regularly.” Regularly as a measure of frequency is highly ambiguous, especially in this case where many other unknown factors determine the level of frequency. This difference in indexing the Live Web in contrast to the Static Web may have led to an urge to put new content online on a frequent basis. Once you

have updated your blog and pinged a blog service your new post is crawled by Technorati and added to its index. In the Live Web it is very important to keep your content fresh as Technorati sorts its search results by freshness and not by relevancy or popularity. Most recently added posts are shown on top regardless of their relevancy or popularity although posts can be sorted by authority or language. It is freshness that counts. This is particularly visible on Technorati's recently redesigned front page that now displays a ticker that contains hot and freshly used tags. In popular blog software such as WordPress you can enable several ping services to be pinged automatically once you have posted a new post thus participating in the automation of freshness.

A fourth major contribution to the freshness trend is RSS (Really Simple Syndication/Rich Site Summary ) a

file in a standardized XML format, containing information on the latest news items published on a site. Available on demand, able to be parsed by dedicated newsreader software or to be embedded into another Website. (Bruns, 2005, p. 241)

Visitors used to come to a website to look for new content but now new content is sent out to readers once it has been published. There is a shift from pull to push in the content of the Static web and the Live web. Often the content of a website or blog is not read on the actual site itself but through a feed or newsreader. Subscribing to a site's RSS feed means that you are automatically notified of the site's latest content through your feedreader. Fresh content is delivered on the spot. The number of feed subscribers is a key factor in Google Blog Search's way of determining the popularity of a blog (Bihun, 2007 & Rowse, 2007). There is a shift from the importance of links, as seen in Google Search's PageRank, to the importance of (fresh) content subscribers, as seen in Google Blog Search Ranking. In Google Blog Search frequency of posting or freshness are not necessarily positive indicators as the frequency of posting might be a negative indication of spammers that automatically generate new posts at a certain interval (Bihun, 2007). By default Google Blog Search sorts its results by relevance instead of by date, as Technorati does. Although freshness plays an increasingly important role in Google Search (Static Web<sup>6</sup>) it is not the most important factor in Google Blog Search (Live Web).

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6 The distinction between the Static Web and the Live Web is blurring as the Live Web increasingly 'penetrates' the Static Web in search engine results.

## Internal Blogging Forces

Besides the previously mentioned external technological forces that contribute to the perceived freshness fetish there also seems to be an internal drive for freshness. I would like to argue that this freshness is a fetish, a fixation. It is something we strive for but when we cannot reach it we feel disappointed and apologize. Apologizing to one's blog audience for a lack of fresh content is quite common in the blogosphere. In 2006 JLS compiled a list of blog excuses under the post title of "Sorry I haven't posted in a while." (JLS, 2006) The extensive list is humorous but a closer look reveals that the apologies are uttered towards the readers, the blog audience. This made me wonder if there are any bloggers who apologize to the blog itself instead of to its readers. It resulted in a post titled "I'm sorry blog excuses." (Helmond, 2007). I noted a few interesting points after analyzing a number of "I'm sorry blog" blog posts. The blog posts imply an established intimacy with the blog:

- The blog is referred to as something human, an intimate partner almost. There are a lot of references to cheating, abandonment and neglect.
- The reference to "here." The blog is somewhere waiting (in blogspace<sup>7</sup>) for its owner to visit, to come by and write something.
- Blogging is seen as a one sided initiative as the sentence "you never call" points out. I personally feel my blog is calling me all the time to enter its blogspace and write something.
- A lack of blogging is not necessarily correlated to a lack of time. Vacations and an abundance of time can cause a lack of writing as well.
- There is a time and importance measure and pressure. There is a feeling that only one can only blog about important things and this must be done preferably on the same day or else it is "too late."

By apologizing to one's blog instead of to one's blog audience, the blog is vitalized in a way that websites were not with their under construction banners and last updated scripts. These were always meant for the website's visitors, as some kind of apology for the "unfinished" state of the website, the lack of freshness or inconvenience experienced. This apologizing for a lack of freshness is not something new or unique to blogs or the web in general as it is also visible in diaries. What is different though is

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7 Blogspace is sometimes used as a synonym for blogosphere in academic research. Kumar et. al. describe blogspace in 'On the Bursty Evolution of Blogspace' as "the space of weblogs (or *blogs*)." This space is more commonly referred to as "Blogosphere: common term to describe the overall community of blogs and bloggers, which is interlinked through a large number of cross-references between individual blog entries." (Bruns & Jacobs, 2006, p. 5)

I use the word blogspace not as a synonym for blogosphere but rather as the location of where the blog "lives" or resides. This space is located somewhere at the intersection of the browser, the blog software and the server.

that through their networked and hypertextual nature blogs are not a static and closed environment like a diary is. Blogs are highly dispersed across the network and the blog text exists in different formats and locations such as RSS and e-mail. We could see blogs as part of what Katherine N. Hayles calls a Work as Assemblage:

[...] with the advent of the Web, communication pathways are established through which texts cycle in dynamic intermediation with one another, which leads to what might be called Work as Assemblage (WaaS). (Hayles, 2005, p. 105)

[...] the WaaS derives its energy from its ability to mutate and transform as it grows and shrinks, converges and disperses according to the desires of the loosely formed collectives that create it. Moving fluidly among and across media, its components take forms distinctive to the media in which they flourish, so the specificities of media are essential to understanding its morphing configurations. (Hayles, 2005, p.107)

This description of the WaaS as a vital object that derives its energy from transforming, converging and dispersing resonates my view on blogs as autonomous unities that derive their energy from dispersion, aggregation and pinging. There are human and nonhuman actors in the network the blog (or the Work as Assemblage) resides in. I previously described these nonhuman factors as the external technological factors but their relation is more subtle and entangled as the following case study illustrates.

### Case study: Vitalizing Dead Blogs

Most bloggers did not permanently abandon their blog after their “I’m sorry blog” excuse post but some of them did. Their sorry post is the last post they have written and the first post visible when visiting the blog. The blog has become one of the many abandoned blogs out there in the blogosphere and ready to be buried in the graveyard of dead blogs. But when is a blog dead? Is there a certain threshold for the degree of freshness a blog should maintain? Should we consider a blog inactive or dead six months or a year after its latest post? Blog hosting services such as Blogger.com and WordPress.com do not close down blogs after a certain period of inactivity. Unless the blog author actively decides to close down the blog it will continue to exist in the blogosphere. This enables the inactive blog to continue to exist as an autonomous, self-sustaining entity that can exist without the input of the blog's author. "The blogger of course does retain a rigid form of control, having the ability of the killswitch (delete blog) to kill it off." (Eikelenboom, 2007) The blogger also has control over the amount of autonomy a blog has by enabling or disabling comments, trackbacks and pingbacks for example. If trackback – which is “one of three types of Linkbacks, methods for Web authors to request notification when somebody links to one of their documents”

(Wikipedia, Trackback, 2007)– is enabled a blog achieves a certain degree of autonomy. References to your blog posts are automatically placed on your blog even if you are no longer actively engaged with your blog.

This also happened in the case of my blog post about blog excuses where the authors that had enabled trackback were notified of my post about their post. Several of the blog authors wrote a comment on my blog post to further elaborate on their blog excuse post and their reasons for not writing. In one particular case my trackback to the excuse post made the author decide to start blogging again. The author of 5 and 42 wrote his post “I’m sorry blog” on the 12<sup>th</sup> of February 2007 which was the last post visible until the 28<sup>th</sup> of May. Whenever I write a blog post my blog automatically attempts to notify any weblogs linked to of the article (a setting in my WordPress blog software) assuming the other side allows link notifications. Two weeks after my blog sent a trackback to 5 and 42’s blog a new blog post was put up:

Well blog, we’ve made it in the blogosphere. According to Anne Helmond New Media Master research blog, we are #1 on the “apologizing to your blog for not blogging” list. Hot. Now, lets get back to blogging. Ok, yes...I missed you too. (5 and 42, 2007)

This case poses questions about the vitality of blogs and whether a blog can live without its author or reading audience. Is it only the content freshness that keeps a blog alive? I would like to argue that freshness is only one factor and that once a blog has been created the control over the blog is out of the author’s hands. RSS feeds go places you cannot control and posts may be put in a different context outside your blog. This is particularly visible in blog scraping:

the process where automated software scans hundreds of thousands of blogs per day, searching for and copying content. The process is sometimes referenced by the name given the software or individuals responsible for the action, “blog scrapers.” “Scraping” essentially stands for copying, or in the case of copyrighted material, stealing content off a blog that is not owned by the individual initiating the scraping process. The scraped content is often used on Spam blogs or splogs. (Wikipedia, Blog Scraping, 2007)

When content is automatically scraped and used without permission of the blog author the intimacy with the blog, as described previously, gets disrupted. The issue also adds a new dimension to Jill Walker’s point of blogs as a form of feral, uncontrollable, hypertext<sup>8</sup>. Comments, trackbacks and pingbacks can automatically be placed and

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8 Walker sees blogs as “the clearest example of truly feral, literary hypertexts today” but Most individual weblogs aren’t feral at all. Quite the contrary, in fact, they’re politely obedient and simply use the default templates, linking to other blogs or sites only if the blogging software makes linking very easy. Sometimes, however, systems or clusterings of weblogs escape and become something more than just a single website with occasional links and commentary. (Walker, 2005, p. 6)

The case of automatically scraped blogs where content is being used to create splogs shows us that RSS has also gone feral which adds a new dimension to Walker’s argument. It also poses the question of authorship, of where does authorship begin and end. Can we speak of authorship if the text is created by the code of the blog software? These issues will be further addressed in my upcoming MA thesis.

inject a certain degree of energy into the blog that can be thrived on by its author. If the relationship with the blog gets disrupted the author may wish to turn to freshness as a way to exercise control.

The subtle and entangled relationship between the internal and external factors that constitute and contribute to the freshness fetish have led to the vitalizing of blogs as autonomous entities. We could describe this as the “blogosphere effect” on freshness. Entities within the blogosphere, such as Google and Technorati’s ranking systems, contribute to the perceived freshness fetish and influence our perception of freshness.<sup>9</sup> Within these entities energy is not necessarily derived from freshness.

## Continuous Partial Presence in a Web Under Construction

A new phenomenon in which all energy is contained within and expressed through freshness is Twitter which is part of a larger trend called micro-blogging. Micro-blogging

is a form of blogging that lets you write brief text updates (usually less than 200 characters) about your life on the go and send them to friends and interested observers via text messaging, instant messaging, email or the web. (Wikipedia, Micro-blogging, 2007)

A type of micro-blogging<sup>10</sup> that has become immensely popular is the social networking and micro-blogging service Twitter. It revolves around “friends and strangers answering one simple question: *What are you doing?*” (Twitter, 2007). It is about letting people know where you are and what you are doing every single second of the day. This information is placed on a personal Twitter homepage and send to people who have subscribed to you, your so-called “followers.” They can choose to receive your updates through e-mail, instant messaging, a text message or other sources. Twitter relieves us from the constrictions of being online by allowing to send and

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9 The blogosphere effects do not only include blog search and ranking engines such as Technorati and Google but also the effects of other nodes in the network. The influence of other nodes, blogs, is particularly visible in the case study of 5 and 42. It may also be visible in the degree blogs in which blogs reference to fresh (new) or less fresh (old) content. Do bloggers mainly cite fresh posts? This question is a good starting point for further research into the question of the influence of the “blogosphere effects.”

10 Another type of micro-blogging is the tumblelog that strives to make blogging easier and faster. Jason Kottke compares these kinds of blogs to the early style of blogs:

A tumblelog is a quick and dirty stream of consciousness, a bit like a remaindered links style linklog but with more than just links. They remind me of an older style of blogging, back when people did sites by hand, before Movable Type made post titles all but mandatory, blog entries turned into short magazine articles, and posts belonged to a conversation distributed throughout the entire blogosphere. Robot Wisdom and Bifurcated Rivets are two older style weblogs that feel very much like these tumblelogs with minimal commentary, little cross-blog chatter, the barest whiff of a finished published work, almost pure editing...really just a way to quickly publish the “stuff” that you run across every day on the web. (Kottke, 2005)

The interface of micro-blogging software such as Tumblr strives to strip down to the essential basis of posting a piece of content. This may affect posting frequency as previously described.

receive updates to and from its service from various sources such as the telephone through text messaging. As danah boyd notes “Sure, we all love to have a sense of what’s going on, but this is push technology at its most extreme.” Fresh content can be uploaded every single second of the day:

Twitter is **Continuous Partial Presence**, mostly made up of mundane messages in answer to the question, "what are you doing?" A never-ending steam of presence messages prompts you to update your own. (Mayfield, 2007)

In blogging external factors such as comments or Trackbacks can prompt to update, as in the case of 5 and 42. With Twitter other people's messages can prompt to update.

To pay continuous partial attention is to pay partial attention -- CONTINUOUSLY. It is motivated by a desire to be a LIVE node on the network. Another way of saying this is that we want to connect and be connected. We want to effectively scan for opportunity and optimize for the best opportunities, activities, and contacts, in any given moment. To be busy, to be connected, is to be alive, to be recognized, and to matter.

We pay continuous partial attention in an effort NOT TO MISS ANYTHING. It is an always-on, anywhere, anytime, any place behavior that involves an artificial sense of constant crisis. We are always in high alert when we pay continuous partial attention. This artificial sense of constant crisis is more typical of continuous partial attention than it is of multi-tasking. (Stone, 2006)

The freshness fetish has stretched beyond the boundaries of the web and has penetrated every single second of our life. The web is in a permanent state of construction and we no longer see it as something that can be finished or is done.

My blog is starting to complete itself. Its not done but its not uncompleted either. It is under construction. A few years back most web pages had a under construction sign but now they are all gone. It seems like people have gotten used to the idea that web pages are never finished but that the continue to evolve. (Hamdi42, 2007)

Even though the under construction signs seem to have gone we are now faced with beta signs. Currently, so-called Web 2.0 sites often display a beta logo to indicate that the website is under continuous development.<sup>11</sup>

There has been an increasing focus on freshness over the past ten years which has led to a perceived freshness fetish. A fetish because it is something we strive for, something we wish and want badly. Perceived because our senses are triggered by post dates or text messages informing us about the latest update. As internal and external

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11 Beta refers to a stage in the software release cycle where beta “is the first version released outside the organization or community that develops the software, for the purpose of evaluation or real-world black/grey-box testing. [...]In the context of Web 2.0, people even talk of perpetual betas to signify that some software is meant to stay in beta state” (Wikipedia, Software Release Life Cycle, 2007) . Flickr.com is one of the very few Web 2.0 sites that went from beta into gamma. Gamma is the next state in the release cycle which points to a version that is “substantially complete, but still under test. ” (Wikipedia, Software Release Life Cycle, 2007) Instead of being substantially complete it is very likely a Web 2.0 joke as Flickr currently displays “Loves you” in its logo instead of “Gamma”. This does not refer to a new version but to the marriage of two Flickr users who met through Flickr.

forces drive us to update our web presence, in the form of various kinds of websites and blogs, we wish to let others know about these updates.

The first updates were communicated by using under construction signs to imply that a website had not been finished yet. Javascript automated this indication of freshness and was accompanied by new images to point to fresh content. Fresh content is always placed on top in blogs where the perceived freshness fetish is visible in internal and external forces. These forces, or blogosphere effects, may also vitalize blogs by injecting blogs with a certain degree of energy through trackback or pinging. Blog search and indexing services such as Technorati feed on the perceived freshness fetish. Our desire to be a live node in the network is reflected in the concept of continuous partial presence. This is seen in Twitter, where we receive constant updates from within the network that prompt us to update as well.

... my blog is calling me, it has been two days since I last updated my blog and it is getting impatient. It is waiting for an update on my post on The Perceived Freshness Fetish.

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## Figures



Fig. 1: Under construction signs and banners

- ◆ What has Eric's Trip got to do with Sonic Youth? Well it's pretty simple... Eric's Trip is the name of a Sonic Youth song.
- ◆ Eric's Trip is Julie Doiron - bass and vocals, Mark Gaudet - drums, Chris Thompson - guitar, Rick White - vocals and guitar
- ◆ Eric's Trip put out some great 7" records. Including some wonderful split singles.
- ◆ Unfortunately Eric's Trip decided to split up, but there is still great music (what a tragedy).

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This page is maintained by Anne Helmond (ahelmond@uvwde.com) using HTML Notepad. Last updated 08/30/1997 18:50:02

Fig. 2: <http://www.geocities.com/SunsetStrip/3500/et.html>

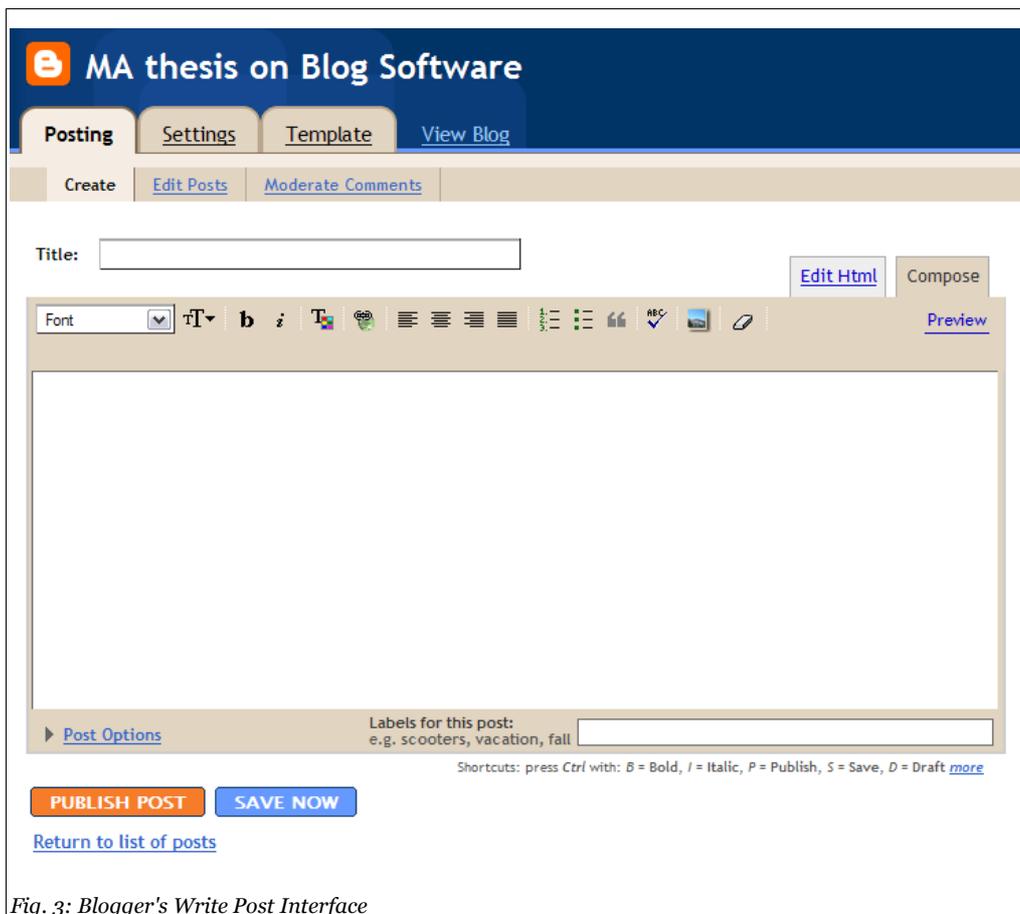


Fig. 3: Blogger's Write Post Interface

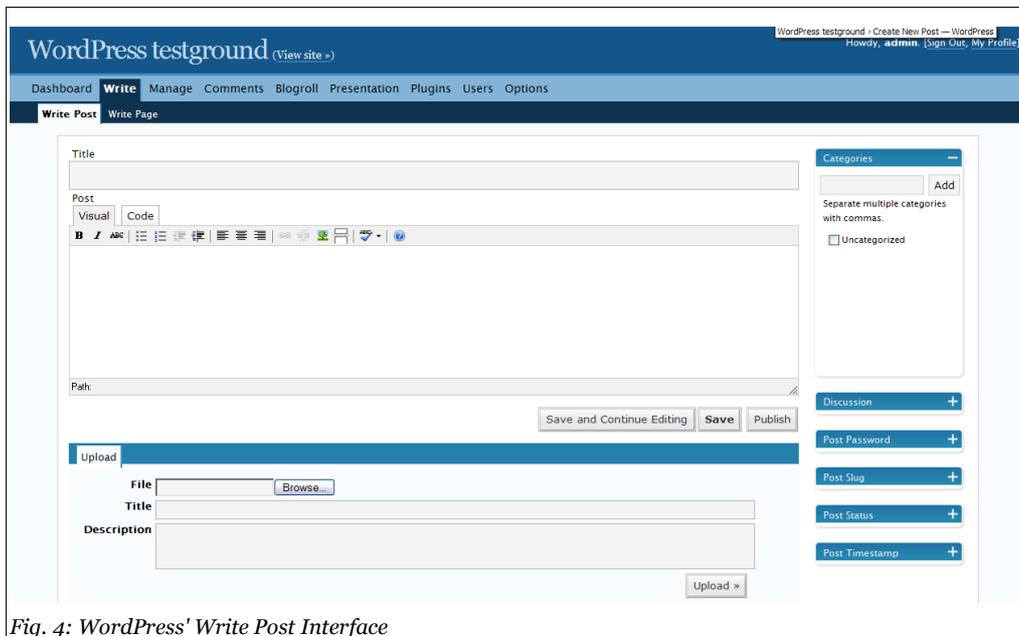


Fig. 4: WordPress' Write Post Interface

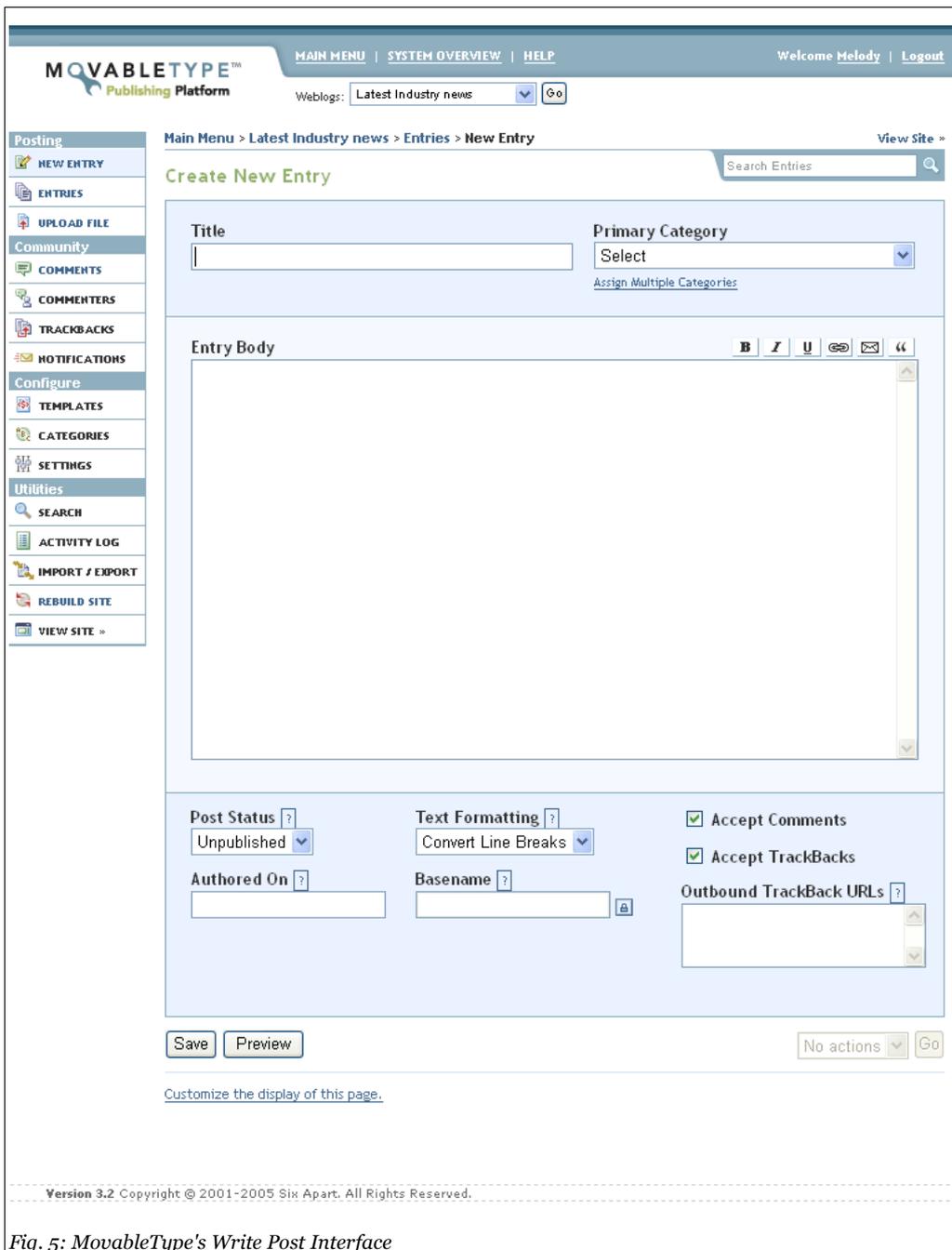


Fig. 5: MovableType's Write Post Interface