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Pressing the Interface: A User Study of the WordPress.com Blog Interface

Blogging has become a very popular online activity. A host of free and low-cost tools have grown to accommodate writers of all kinds – from hobbyists to diarists, from professionals to government officials and beyond. Blogs are attached to social networking software, or can be started for events, such as the project at CaringBridge.org that helps patients and their families set up blogs in medical emergencies. As blogging software tools are increasingly able to integrate with other kinds of Web-based software – such as social networking platforms (like Facebook), photosharing applications (like Flickr), microblogging tools (like Twitter), social bookmarking sites (like Delicious) – some have argued that blogging platforms are becoming more like Content Management Systems (CMS) than simply spaces for chronologically displayed text.

Blogging software has typically been seen as very basic and easy to use. A cognitive walkthrough of three popular platforms - WordPress, Blogger, and TypePad – found that there are indeed possible areas of improvement for blogging interfaces, and also that of the three, WordPress seemed to be the most flexible, scalable, and extensible for a serious and robust blog that may, over time, need functions more commonly found in a CMS. As online content grows, and individuals continue to blend the traditional static Web site with the interactivity of blogging, time is ripe to reconsider if blogging software is actually as easy to navigate as has been assumed. In the below document, a User Study of WordPress.com's interface is conducted and analyzed.

On Usability Testing
The user study conducted has been influenced by the kind of usability testing outlined in About Face 3: The Essentials of Interaction Design by Cooper, Reimann and Cronin, and by Jakob Nielsen – particularly as expressed in chapter 6 of his work Usability Engineering. I also draw on ideas from the Usability Toolkit at http://www.stcsig.org/usability/resources/toolkit/toolkit.html, and Task-Centered User Interface Design as laid out here by Clayton Lewis and John Reimann.

This user study for the functionality of the free, fully hosted WordPress platform (as available at www.wordpress.com) was undertaken in November of 2009 as part of a series of investigations into the usability of the platform. In preparation, a "test" blog was set up at http://testdrive09.wordpress.com/.

User Background [2]
The user for this test shall be called "Lily," although this is not her real name. (1)Lily is in her late 20s/early 30s, in her final year of Law school and is very comfortable with computes although she does not consider herself a technological expert. Lily owns a PC, a laptop, and feels she does "basic things" on her computer easily –

things such as using word processors and spreadsheets, searching the Internet, retrieving information from databases like WestLaw, and using email. Lily has used the Blogger platform before, but infrequently, and had never used WordPress in any capacity before. Lily does have and use a Twitter account. While Lily may not self-identify as being an above-average user, she is indeed adept at using technology, as indicated by her fluency with a laptop track pad, her ownership of her own computer, her fluency with computer based terminology, social networking usages, and use of a web-enabled cell phone. In fact, after the user test, Lily was so excited about WordPress and the possibilities of re-engaging in blogging as a hobby that she went home and started up her own free blog through WordPress.com – another sign of her computer literacy, facility, access, and interest. This user was useful for the study as she was familiar enough with the concept of blogging, had had a little experience with the form (although from a different interface) and would be the type of user very likely to start a blog, either as a hobby or perhaps to be tasked to her in a professional setting.

The usability test took place on a Mac Book Pro and used the Safari browser, version 4.0.3.

Study Questions [3]
In order to facilitate efficient use of the user's time, a test blog was set up beforehand and appropriately populated in order to facilitate all the tasks below. At the beginning of the test, the user was shown the blog's "front end," and then the "back end" dashboard, although no context for how to operate either was shared. The user was encouraged to "think aloud," and reminded this was not a test of her skills or knowledge but rather a test-drive of the interface.

The list of study questions prepared beforehand were:

Tasks relating to posting and editing blog posts
1. Let's say you wanted to see the blog as it would appear to your readers. How can this be viewed?
2. You want to make a new entry. How would this be done?
3. Let's say that in that last entry, you wanted some of the text to be colored red. How might this be done?
4. Say you wanted to put a picture in that last entry. (A picture from another Web site was open in another tab of the browser.) Let's see how that might be done.
5. There is a typo in the heading of an old entry. How could this be fixed?
6. Let's say that you wanted it to appear that the entry you just made had actually been put up yesterday, although it was actually put up today. Does WordPress make this possible?
7. You decide that you want to delete this entry entirely. How would you go about removing it completely?

Tasks relating to reading and editing comments

8. You want to see all the things your readers have said in response to your blog entries. How could you do this?
9. There is a bad response that you don't want on your blog. How can it be removed?
10. Say you are getting a lot of unrelated responses that you don't like, and decide you don't want to allow users to react anywhere on the blog. How might this happen?

Task relating to adding a separate page to the blog

11. Out on your blog, there is a Biography area where your readers can learn more about you. Say you wanted to create something similar to that, but it would say "Contact Me." This should be equal to, and not part of, the Biography section. How might this happen?

Tasks related to appearance of the blog (front end)

12. You've been writing more about professional subjects on your blog, and decide you no longer like the way it looks, such as the figure of the woman. How might it be made to look more professional?
13. You want to have the top of the blog display something other than "Testdrive09's Blog." Can this be changed? How?
14. Looking at your blog, you see the text that says "Just Another Wordpress.com Blog." Can this be changed? How?

Tasks relating to analytics/measuring use of the blog

15. You've been telling your friends and co-workers about your blog, and you want to know how popular it is. How would you assess this?

16. Can you see if anyone is getting regular updates when you add new writing to the blog?
17. Your sister said she added a link to your blog from her blog. Can you see if she did this yet?

Tasks relating to modifying the interface (the back end controls)

18. Sometimes computer programs allow you to change what controls you are seeing. Does WordPress allow this, and if so, what can be changed?
19. Similarly, sometimes you can personalize the look of your controls to look especially familiar to you every time you log in. Is this possible?

Advanced tasks, relating to management of the blog, mobile device access, and integration of other services

20. Say you were having a problem with WordPress (use a task the user has struggled with, if any). How might assistance be found?
21. Say you and I decide we want to write this blog together, and I want to be able to log in and submit writings, too. Can I get access to this like you can? How can you grant me that permission?
22. Is there a way to use your cell phone with WordPress? What can you do from your phone, and is there any setup required?
23. Say you are using Twitter to also post information that you want on your blog. Can you link the two, and if so, how?

Study Results
The user responses are summarized on a question-by-question basis below, with analysis where appropriate (with further analysis in the following section). While the user was not able to find a solution to all 23 tasks, she did make it through all tasks in the hour allotted for the study.

1. Let's say you wanted to see the blog as it would appear to your readers. How can this be viewed?
    a. Lily did not see nor use the "View Blog" button at the top of the interface [6], perhaps because it blends so well with the banner behind it. Rather, she skimmed around the page until coming to the "Your Stuff" area of the interface, where she clicked to be taken out to the front end of the blog.
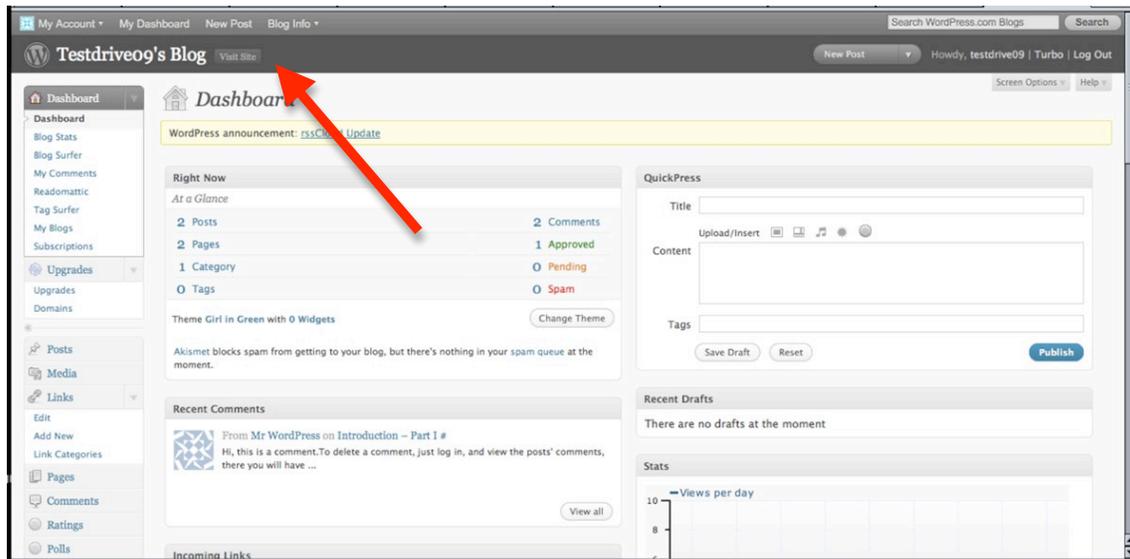
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Figure 1 Slightly hard to see "view blog" button

2. You want to make a new entry. How would this be done?
   a. To return to the dashboard, Lily navigated with her back button, as opposed to using the "My Dashboard" link in the top bar. Once there, she went right to the "QuickPress" area, entered a title and blog post, and hit publish. When asked to go out and look at her blog post, Lily again returned to the "Your Stuff" area to navigate out to the front end of her blog. Although this early preference for using what's known is fine, it does seem a bit surprising [7] that she didn't see or use the other links at the top of the page [6], perhaps indicating that the busy graphical interface of the dashboard is confusing and dense for novice users. At this point Lily is unaware of the tools under the "Post" navigation in the left column navigation bar.
3. Let's say that in that last entry, you wanted some of the text to be colored red. How might this be done?
   a. Lily seems daunted at this task. She sees no options in the QuickPress area for coloring text, and so begins hunting for a "Full Press" option. She does eventually find the "Posts" button, but upon clicking it and seeing the list of posts, is unaware that clicking on the name of the post will give her more robust options for editing than she is used to in QuickPress. [6] She does see the "add new" button, tries that, sees the option for changing text color in the WYSIWYG, and, perhaps forgetting the full task, merely makes a new post, coloring some of the text red. When asked to edit her first post, rather than creating a new post, she returns to the "Your Stuff" area of the page, still surprisingly unaware that there is another way to get out to the front end interface. Once at the front end, she sees the small "edit" feature by her first blog post and clicks there, finding she is again at the

WYSIWYG editor, where she changes the color of the text and clicks "Update" to update.
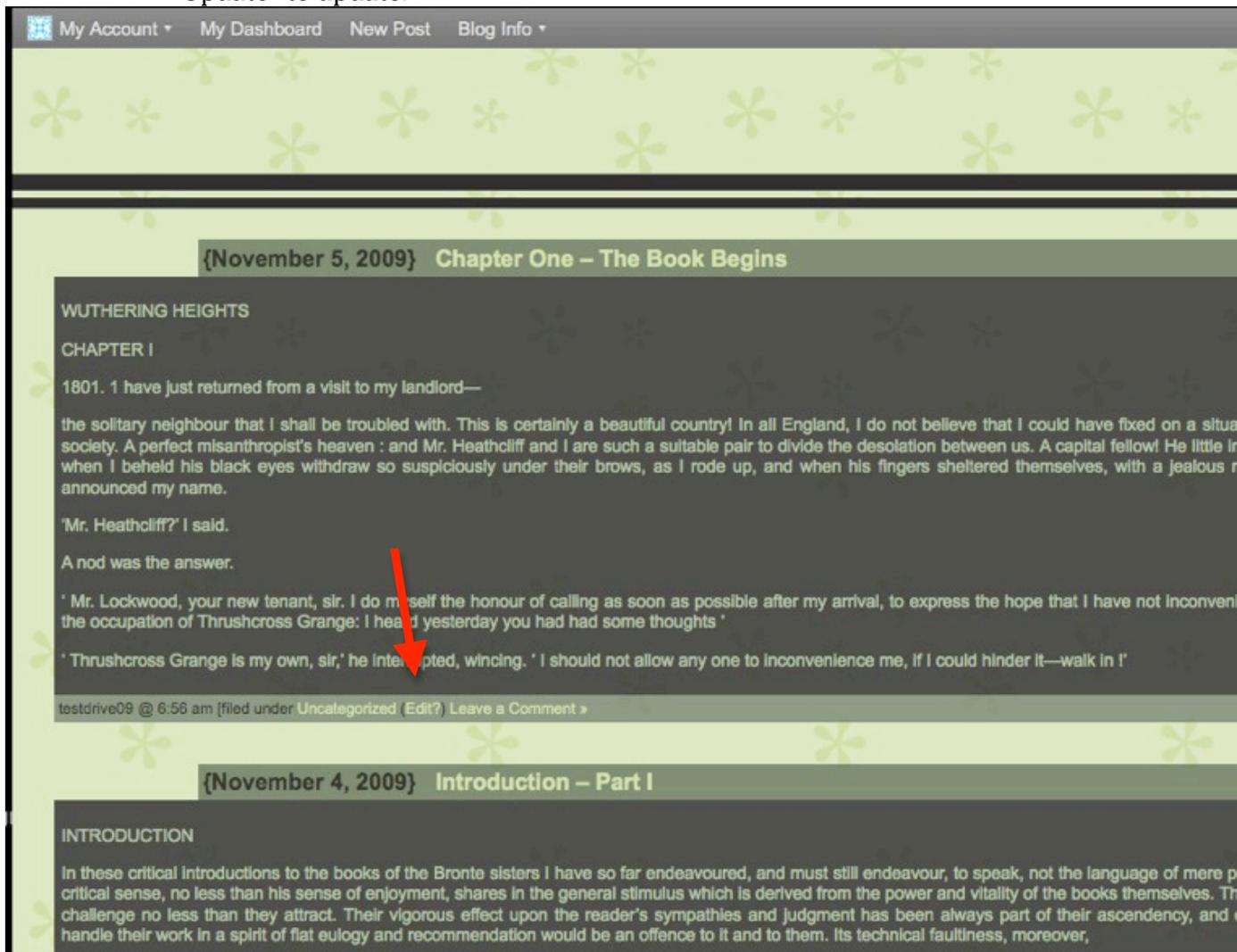
4. Say you wanted to put a picture in that last entry. (A picture from another Web site was open in another tab of the browser.) Let's see how that might be done.

   a. Lily uses the copy menu option under the Edit menu to copy the picture, and then, by again going to "Your Stuff" navigates back to her first post. She pastes the picture in and clicks Update. When asked to see if this worked, she goes out to the blog post - this time using the "Post Updated. View Post." Link – and is surprised to see that the photo is not visible. It would seem that she may not understand how to place images on Web sites, and seems surprised that the

functionality is not like that of, say, a word processor (where cut and paste would be adequate). At no point in the user study does she explore or indicate she sees or recognizes the icons for "Upload/Insert" at the top of the WYSIWYG editor. [6] We move on to the next task without resolving the photo display issue.

5. There is a typo in the heading of an old entry. How could this be fixed?
   a. Lily uses the back button to return to the front end of her blog, where she uses the little "edit" feature associated with the erroneous entry, easily fixing the typo.

6. Let's say that you wanted it to appear that the entry you just made had actually been put up yesterday, although it was actually put up today. Does WordPress make this possible?
   a. Lily goes back out to the front end of the blog and clicks on the appropriate entry's edit option. She does not see the appropriate date option in the publish box, although she spends considerable time reading the interface and scanning for such an option. [7] As she reads down the interface, she says "Pingbacks? I don't know what that is," expressing her exasperation at finding so many things. She clicks on the "Help" button in the upper right corner, saying as she does so, "This is going to be a disaster." [7] She systematically clicks through 4 or 5 of the help menus, reading quickly, aware that this will likely not help her. She indicates that she's looking for "general blog options," perhaps global settings. She clicks on "Settings" in the lower left corner, and skims it. She tries "documentation on date formatting," but is shocked at being taken to a page at WordPress.org that says "codex" at the top. Lily says "WordPress is for people who know more than me!" and gives up on the task.

7. You decide that you want to delete this entry entirely. How would you go about removing it completely?
   a. Lily navigates back to her blog by returning to the "Your Stuff" area. Once at the front end of her blog, she clicks edit and then highlights the blog post and hits move to trash.

8. You want to see all the things your readers have said in response to your blog entries. How could you do this?
   a. Lily remembers seeing a "view all" option for this, although it does take her some time to connect the term "comments" to this task. She finds the comments menu and (correctly) assumes this represents all the comments on her blog.

9. There is a bad response that you don't want on your blog. How can it be removed?
   a. Similar to deleting her blog post, she checks the box to the left of the offending comment and then uses the drop down for "move to trash". She does not mouse over the comment name and therefore does not see the popup with "Unapprove – Spam – Trash…" It is confusing why

> this menu only appears when the comment is moused over as the colored text is useful – this may be a candidate for change.

10. Say you are getting a lot of unrelated responses that you don't like, and decide you don't want to allow users to react anywhere on the blog. How might this happen?

    a. Lily goes back to the Settings menu, saying "We know how well that worked last time!" Although she is being funny, it is clear that she is a little annoyed at the sheer availability of options and that it is hard to find the right words associated with what she wants to do. Lily notices the discussions option and clicks it, once there she unchecks the option for "Allow people to post comments on new articles." She continues to explore this menu, and expresses interest in the comment blacklist feature. Upon going out to the site, she sees that she can still leave comments on her existing posts, and is frustrated, saying that she should only have to click one box to turn off all comments. (She has not seen (These settings may be overridden for individual articles.) which is under the box she has just unchecked) She now navigates back to the dashboard for the first time using the dashboard bar under the URL bar, returns to settings, discussions, and re–reads the screen. "Well," she says, "I refuse to use help." And she ends the task saying "This is where this should be."

11. Out on your blog, there is a Biography area where your readers can learn more about you. Say you wanted to create something similar to that, but it would say "Contact Me." This should be equal to, and not part of, the Biography section. How might this happen?

    a. Lily goes back to the dashboard, her clear home base for starting a new search. She tries "appearance" on the left bar navigation. She makes a shocked noise and when asked says "Widgets?! Edit my CSS?! Maybe if I knew what CSS was…" She then explores the "Edit CSS" link, and quickly hits the back button, saying "I don't know what that wants me to do." She tries the "Extras" link, and then "Widgets." She expresses confusion: "What's a widget? Why can't they use simple words? Like "Add something to your blog" or "take something away from your blog"…" She continues to read aloud to herself – reading aloud things she is unfamiliar with: Gravatar? Meebo? Meta? She says "I feel really stupid. This should be easy," before leaving the widgets section. Once back at the dashboard, she tries the Users section and the Tools section. She laughs here – "Turbo? Don't give me this junk." She says, again humorously but obviously in a frustrated manner, "Apparently I'm like a child. I want pictures. This is too much text." Lily returns to Settings, though she seems to know this is not the right place. She tries the Privacy setting; when asked about it, she says "Well, I'm really not sure what I'm looking for. I'm looking for some kind of edit." This seems to spur her to go back out to the front end of her blog and more closely examine the "Biography" section that the question has asked her to duplicate. This is particularly interesting [7]

because *Lily is now using the front end of her blog to try and figure out the back end*. Likely notices this Biography section is listed under "Pages" and returns to her dashboard, armed with this essential vocabulary word. She easily finds the "Pages" option in the menu and adds a page. This long journey has been frustrating to her, but she is relieved to finally have found an answer.
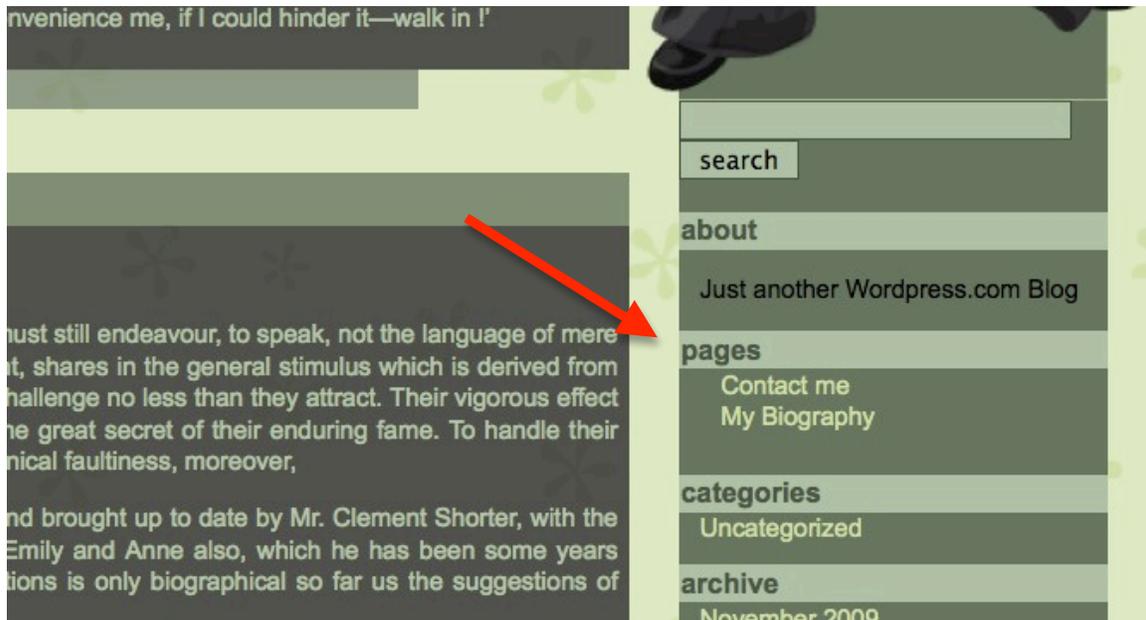

Figure 3 How Lily found the confusing "pages" word - her key to the task

12. You've been writing more about professional subjects on your blog, and decide you no longer like the way it looks, such as the figure of the woman. How might it be made to look more professional?

a. Lily remembers having seen the graphics under Appearance →
Theme. She browses the first page, looking for one she likes, clicks
Preview and then Activate. She likes how easy this is and the new look
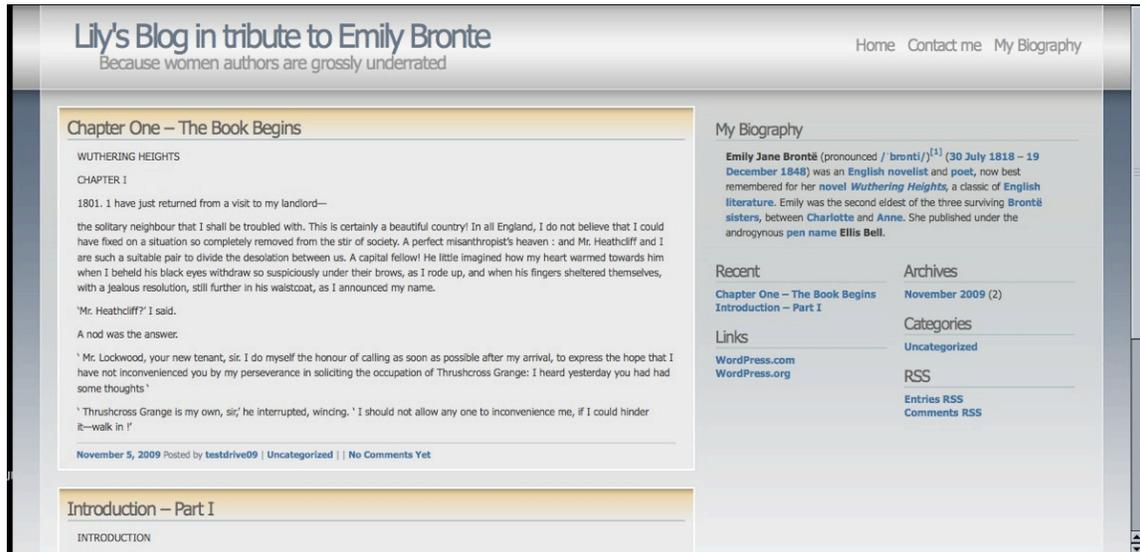of her blog.

Figure 4 The newly applied, more professional theme

13. You want to have the top of the blog display something other than
"Testdrive09's Blog." Can this be changed? How?
   a. Lily looks under the drop-down menu under "My Account" but doesn't
   see anything there that looks promising. She returns o the dashboard.
   She quickly scans the dashboard before trying the trick that worked
   with the pages feature – she goes out to the front end of her blog to
   look for clues or an "edit" button. Finding none, she returns to the
   dashboard. "Oh, God," she says. "I'll try settings again." Even though
   Lily has often been at this page, she does not know this is right at the
   top. She is thrilled to finally find something she had been seeking
   actually on the Settings page! She goes out to the blog and is relieved
   to see it changed.
14. Looking at your blog, you see the text that says "Just Another Wordpress.com
Blog." Can this be changed? How?
   a. Lily goes to Dashboard → Settings and says this is now her "default"
   thing to do. She finds this field and changes it.
15. You've been telling your friends and co-workers about your blog, and you
want to know how popular it is. How would you assess this?
   a. Lily knows she has seen this before. "Oh, where did I see that," she
   says, chewing her lip. She anxiously scans the dashboard, clearly

afraid it will be hard to find. She is delighted when she connects the graph under "Stats" as being the answer to this question.

16. Can you see if anyone is getting regular updates when you add new writing to the blog?
    a. Lily says she would assume this would be near stats. Not finding it, she does see the "subscribers" link in the top left. She clicks it, and sees that she doesn't have any – but then wonders: "What does this mean? Does it mean nobody is subscribing to me, or I'm not subscribing to others?" Lily does not think to go out to her blog and see how subscribers might subscribe, nor does she try to test this [6]. This is a good question, as I myself as the tester am unsure what this means. (This is an area I should have better researched before going into the user test, I realize during this task.)

17. Your sister said she added a link to your blog from her blog. Can you see if she did this yet?
    a. Lily says she would simply go to her sister's blog to see if the link was up. When asked about others who might be linking to her, of which she may not be aware, she goes back to the dashboard. She finds the incoming links area of the screen; again it is interesting how often she has scrutinized this page, yet not registered that this area is here – reinforcing that users are not likely to retain all the elements of a busy interface.

18. Sometimes computer programs allow you to change what controls you are seeing. Does WordPress allow this, and if so, what can be changed?
    a. Lily returns to Appearance, but realizes this is only for the front-end appearance. When returning to the Dashboard, the field at the top of the dashboard with hints/tips says "RSS Cloud Update." Lily expresses that this is confusing and annoying and that it makes the overwhelming interface that much more confusing. Lily goes to the Settings page before giving up on the task – she says she assumes it is probably possible, but had she not been given the task, she would not think to look for this. At no point does Lily seem to be familiar with the upper right hand corner idiom, and she does not see the "Screen Options" tab.
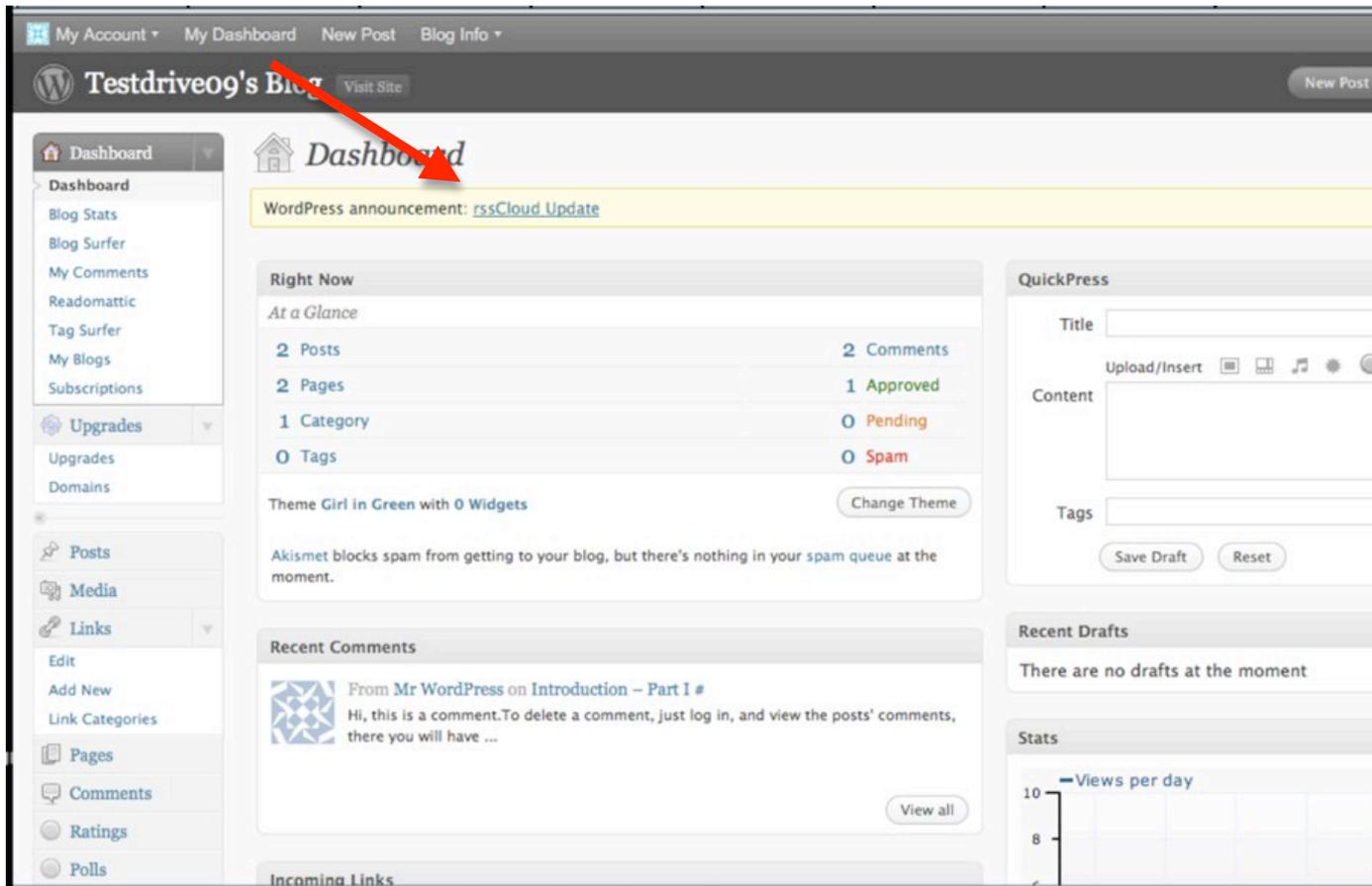
Figure 5 The confusing/distracting text

19. Similarly, sometimes you can personalize the look of your controls to look especially familiar to you every time you log in. Is this possible?
    a. Lily again says this is probably possible, that she would never TRY to do this on her own, and that she's not sure how or where to look. She doesn't express any awareness of the clickability of the username in the top right corner, where this option is; nor has she found this in any of her previous exploration.
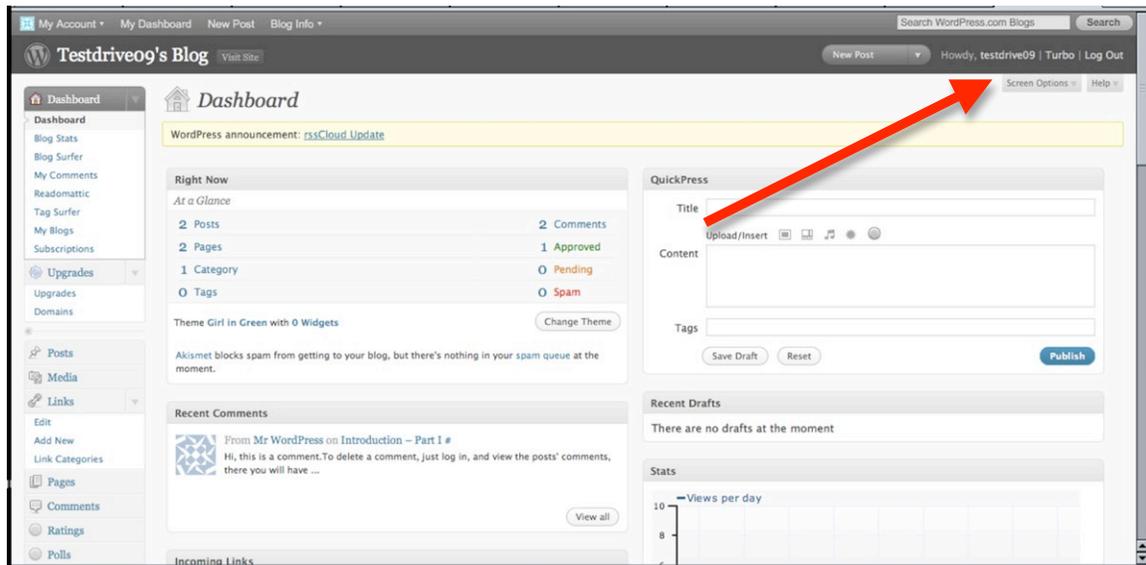
Figure 6 The username - not seen nor clicked at any point

20. Say you were having a problem with WordPress – such as not being able to find how to customize the back-end display, as in the last two tasks. . How might assistance be found?
    a. Lily scrolls to the bottom of the page and clicks the "Support" link. She says it "looks friendly" but indicates she would not use the forums – she says she can never find what she needs in forums and would never use them for help. She skims some headings in support and says she is glad to see "Contact Support" and indicates this would be how she would use help. It is possible that Lily is tired at this point, but she also seems like this is a frank answer and that she is not fond of nor a frequent user of self-guided help.
21. Say you and I decide we want to write this blog together, and I want to be able to log in and submit writings, too. Can I get access to this like you can? How can you grant me that permission?
    a. Lily says "Oh, I saw that somewhere" and proceeds to look for something on "authors". She goes to Posts, then Settings, where she looks under the Writing subhead. She knows she has seen this, after slowly reading the left menu, sees Users, where she finds that she can add an email to grant others access.
22. Is there a way to use your cell phone with WordPress? What can you do from your phone, and is there any setup required?
    a. Lily returns to the Dashboard main page. She says she is sure this is possible but that it would be very unlikely she would think or what to use this feature. She tries Tools, and sees "Post by email" which she says she could do from her phone.
23. Say you are using Twitter to also post information that you want on your blog. Can you link the two, and if so, how?

a. Lily says she has seen this on other blogs and that she would be likely to do this, if she were really blogging. She looks at Appearance, but assumes it is not a Theme. She sees "widgets" and says "Ah!! Is that a widget?" She explores the widgets and finds one for Twitter.

At the end of the study, Lily says that she likes the way WordPress blogs look, and that during the study she felt very dumb because the interface has so many options and words she doesn't know. She expresses that she feels she could use WordPress, a fact confirmed by her later going home and starting a blog. She expressed that it was not as easy to use as she remembered Blogger being; but she was not a frequent blogger and she indicated that she was not trying to do many "fancy" things with it that she obviously could learn about with Wordpress.

Study Analysis
Many of the frustrations Lily experienced as a new WordPress user will likely be overcome relatively quickly. She will move from a novice to an intermediate user quickly, and just in the hour we spent with the interface she rapidly became familiar with the words, concepts, and structure of the interface.

Conclusions
There are several (presumably) quick things that can be done to improve the interface of the free blogging software available at www.wordpress.com as uncovered in this user study. The are, in no particular order:

1. Highlight the "view blog" button in the banner.
2. Make the mouse-over options there all the time…consistently color TRASH in red (like it is in Posts – do this for pages, comments, etc)
3. Allow for hints and tips to be OPTIONAL in the dashboard – it's just another confusing texty thing!

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