

The Gutenberg Journey

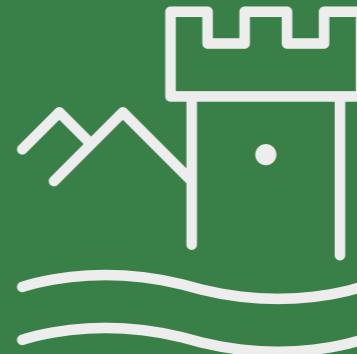
Tammie Lister - @karmatosed

Hi and thanks for the introduction.

The Gutenberg journey starts with the editor. For those of you that don't know this is the current focus of WordPress and the codename for the project looking at creating a new publishing and content editing experience.

Today I am going to explore why this journey is needed and show where this path has gone so far. Along the way I am going to show you some of the foundations behind the project. I'll end looking to the future, because this journey doesn't end with 5.0.

The Reason



All journeys start with a reason.

Be it a quest for a dragon, a mission to a far distant planet.. they all start with a why.

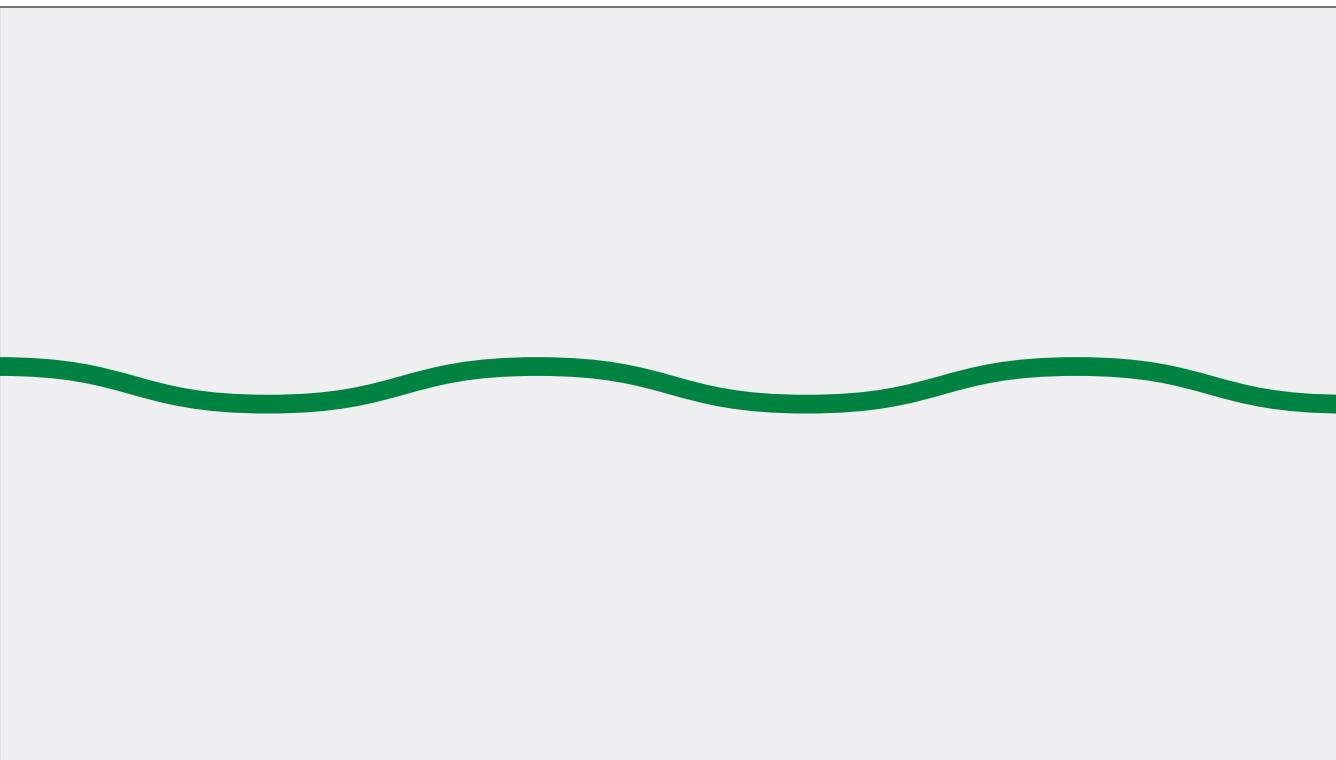
The why of this journey is more a series of whys.

It begins with WordPress. If WordPress was a place it would be a kind of safe... isolated place.

A little like a nice safe cosy castle... why should anything change? Things are nice here...everything is great. There is this solid building no need to upset things by changing.

Change is hard, scary and we don't like change.

But is that really the situation? Is the castle built on sand?

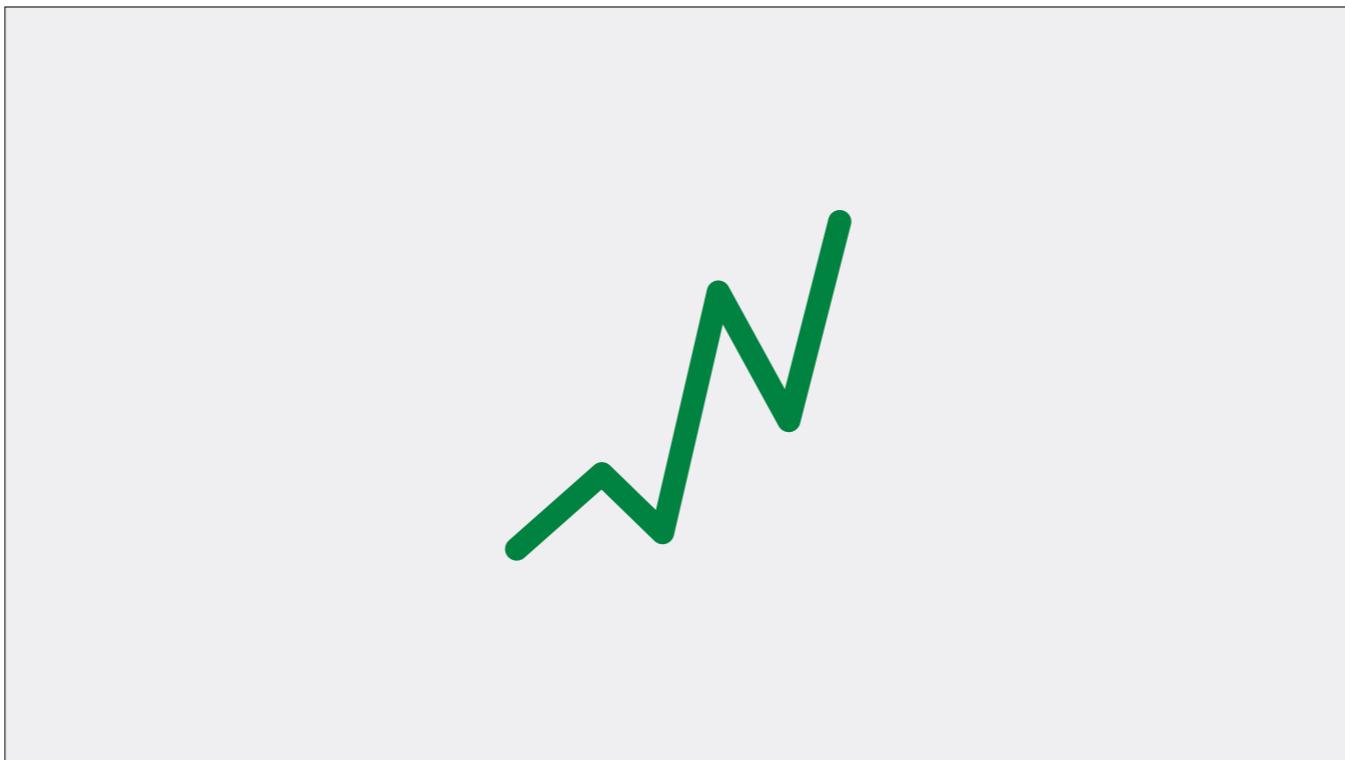


This is what most of us assume it's like learning WordPress.

After all, it's easy to add a plugin right? It's incredible simply to tag, categorise and publish a post.

Who on earth wouldn't understand this?

We maybe recognise a few themes and plugins have little learning bumps, not curves.. gentle little under hour learnings that are fixed with a video or just common sense.



This is the reality for most when learning WordPress.

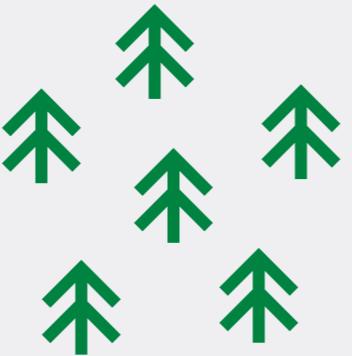
It starts out with good intention but rapidly goes up into confusion and up and down.

Truly ‘knowing’ WordPress is a long road.

Most in this room will have been using WP for a while, whilst we all have different paths, we are mostly far removed from that starting point.

WP to most new people is a trial they have to get over to get where we are all sitting comfortably today.

We bring our headspace of bias, to us WP is easy... but that wasn't always the case and even the WP we learnt was a far simpler and easier to understand product than today.



There is a fundamental flaw in WordPress and that comes in the phrase so many so easily use, it's the phrase...
“the WordPress way”.

It's expected users understand this.... Expected those creating products learn it.... Work around it.

Page builders have to jump through hoops to get even the simplest of things done because of this WordPress way. This WordPress way has made us all not see clearly... it clouds. It's forced us to be limited and overgrown around us. Many of us create in a dense wood, working around the legacy trees.

Sure we cope... but is coping really the way to get beyond 31% of the web?



The web started out with just words.

Text was the currency. A post was just words and as time moved on the occasional if you were being fancy, very poor quality image that took longer than cooking a four course meal to download. This was a fast web, it was a flat web.... The content delivered simply.

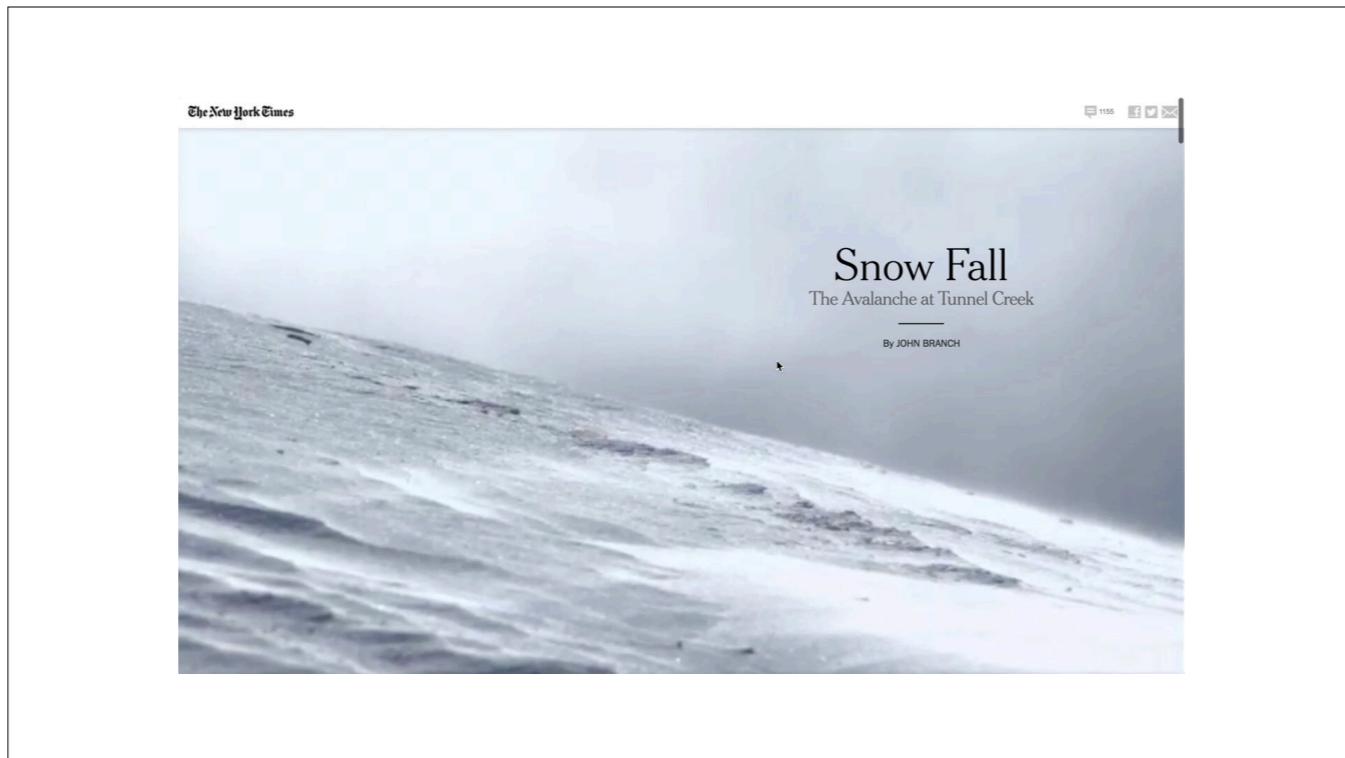


People now want to publish rich content. It's something expected.

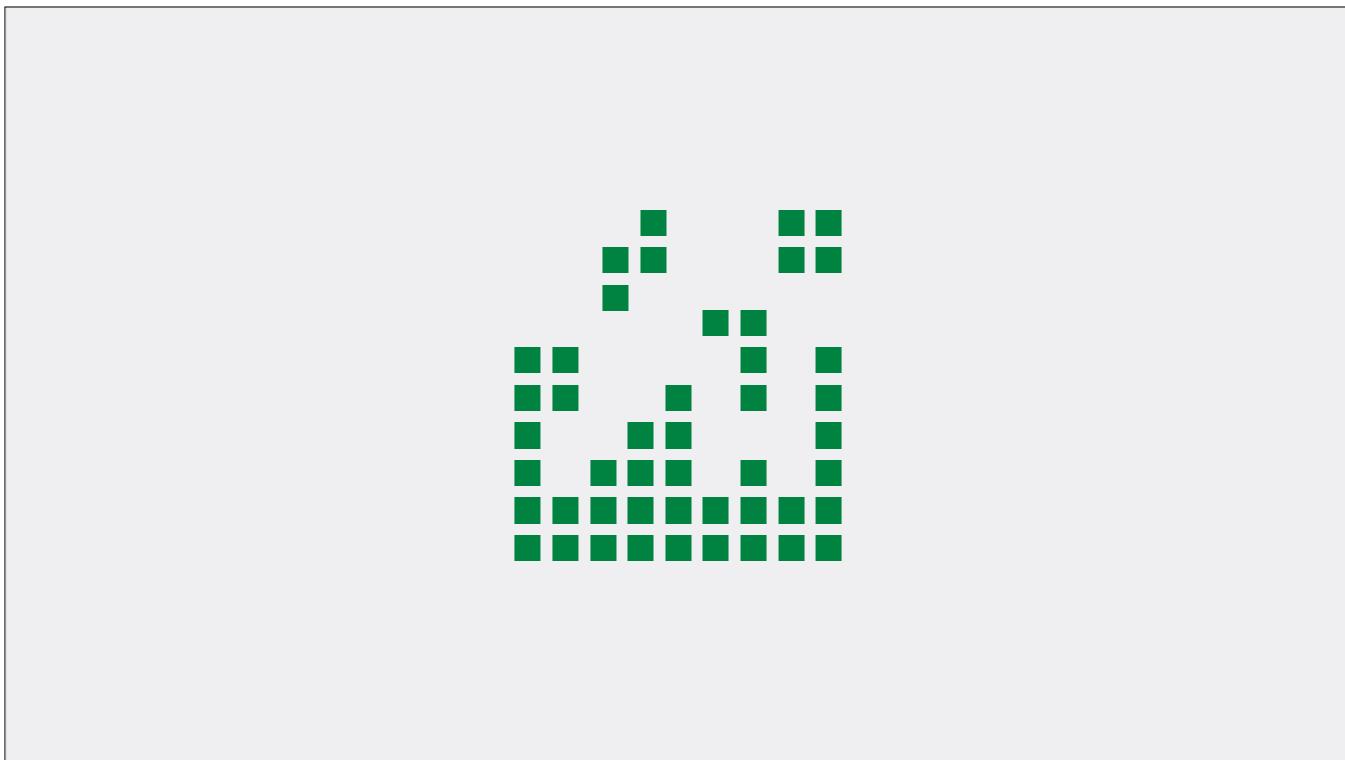
We expect to be able to create this content wherever we are.

Post photos on the move, write blog posts during a train ride.

We expect to read and be engaged, to not just read a wall of text. If we want that we save to an offline service. The web has become an entertainment platform over one that just delivers content.



This video shows Snow Fall, whilst a little older now this story from New York Times has been somewhat of a guiding light during creating Gutenberg. I say story as this transcends the restrictions of the_post. This truly tales the story, it engages, it's impactful. Creating content rich content like this should be easy within WordPress. For WordPress to democratise publishing it needs to reflect the needs of publishing in a changing world.

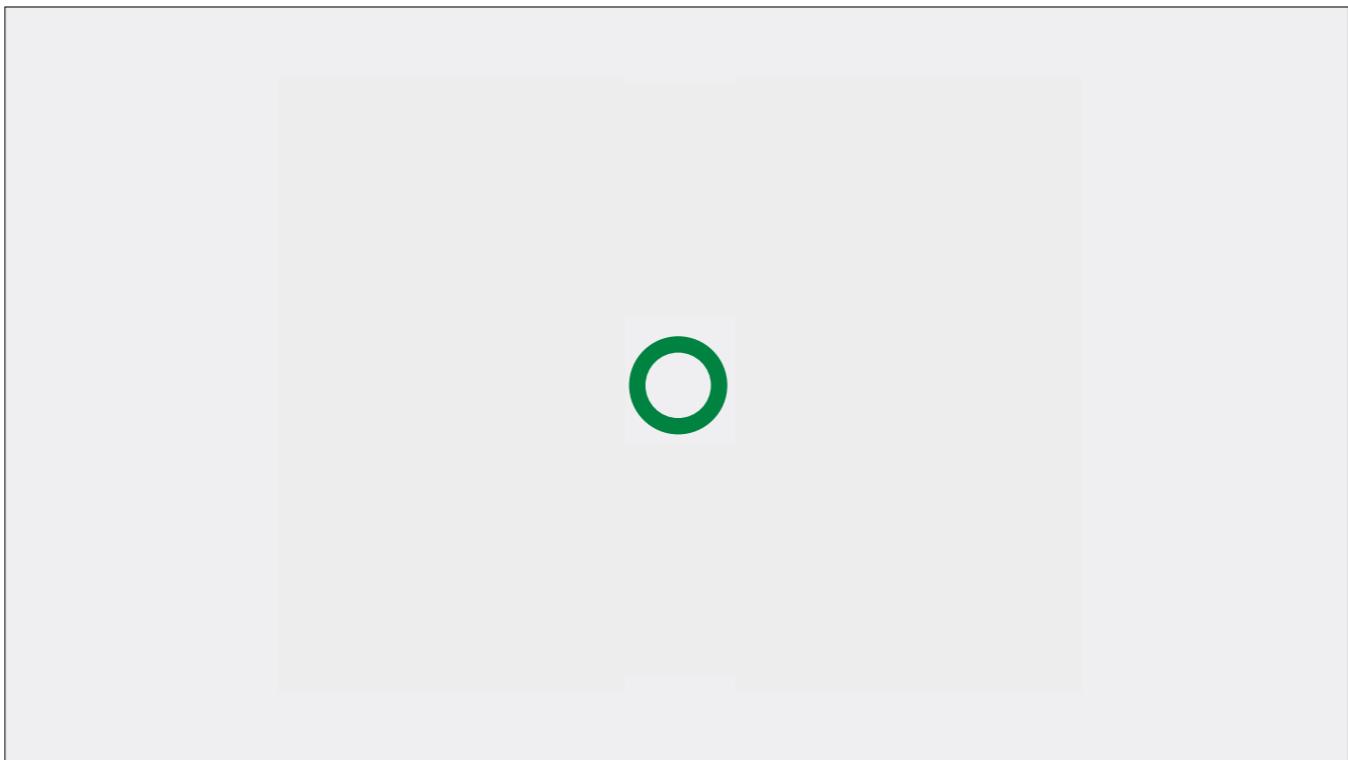


Likely your thought is someone could use a plugin or a site builder to achieve what I am showing. To get that content rich experience. Whilst yes some combination will get that, is it fair we expect pretty early on people to have to find, use and care for plugins?

When was the last time you saw a site with less than 2 plugins?

To that point, when was the last time you saw a site with a few plugins to do the same thing?

Most sites are held together with hope, tiers of plugins meshed together with the same finesse of Tetris. If anyone of you have played Tetris for a while you know how incredibly hard to manage to combine later levels becomes as flurry after flurry of blocks shower down... this is most peoples experience of WordPress.



The current situation holds back innovation. Anything done has to be done within the strict, relentless boundaries of WordPress. Agencies are held back, those that create content are limited and those creating products have to find hacks around the blockade.

This wasn't the intent but it's what happens to all software, at some point a rethink, an evaluation needs to happen.

For a while WordPress stood unchallenged, a little like the surviving planet in a system. That however is changing new planets have been discovered, we aren't alone in this universe anymore.



There are real challenges to the position of WordPress. These have to be recognised and responded to. It's no longer the only or most obvious choice to have a WordPress site. Co-working spaces are no longer just filled with people using WordPress, take a look around.. many are using Squarespace. Designers and developers are writing blog posts on medium, choosing it over their own blogs. Wix and weebly to name but a few more bite at the heels of WordPress. Whilst most are hosted (the false cry against so many options as being a challenge) they all are orbiting and pulling in users from what was once the space WordPress commanded. People don't want the hassle that caring for their own WordPress is, who even has time for this anymore?



Without a change, the future of WordPress is uncertain, we have to face that fact. Whilst right now it may not feel bleak, as a project we need a change and that is where Gutenberg comes in. In itself this project isn't going to save WordPress. It's not a super heroine or miracle cure all. It is a start, it's a step in the right direction to making, shifting WordPress into the future, into relevance.

The Foundations



All journeys need packing for. Creating a new editing experience for Gutenberg has been no different.

I want to share some of the foundations of Gutenberg.

These thread throughout the work done.

You can see them in the patterns of interaction, in the way the project has shaped.

I'll note I am not going to get into the technical foundations here, this is looking panned out from that.

Everything is a block



Everything starts with blocks. These are the essence.

Thinking in blocks, patterns isn't new. Artists have been breaking down complex shapes into simpler ones for a very long time. Humans are amazing pattern recognition machines, it's in our brains.

In digital experiences components aren't new either, the labels may change but the principle is the same.

You distill down to the smallest group and build up.

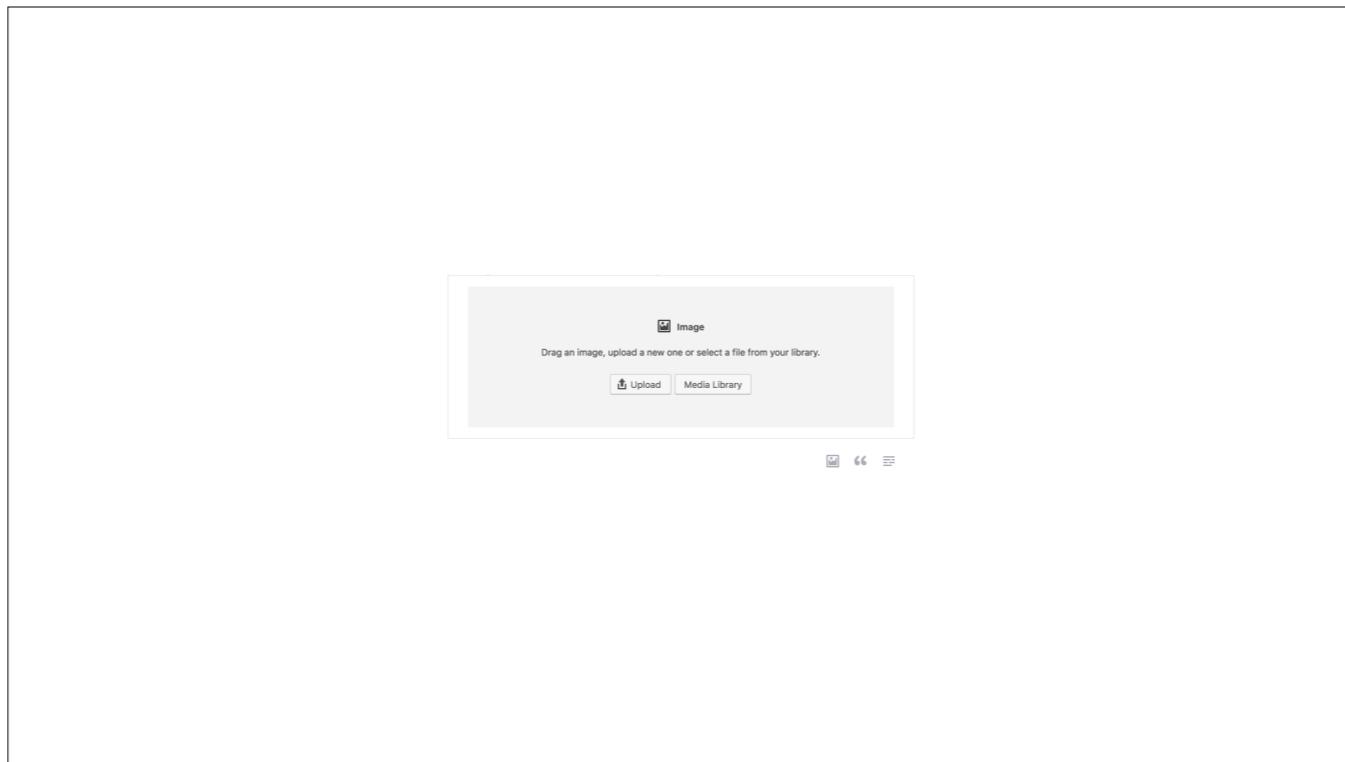


Everything is a block. From that point you can then combine blocks to get incredibly rich content.

Blocks have a few advantages, they isolate errors - block by block html editing or errors serve as a barrier over breaking the entire post. The block is a boundary, a safe container for content.

They also allow quick understanding. A foundation principle in Gutenberg is once you learn how to use the block, you understand how to use all blocks.

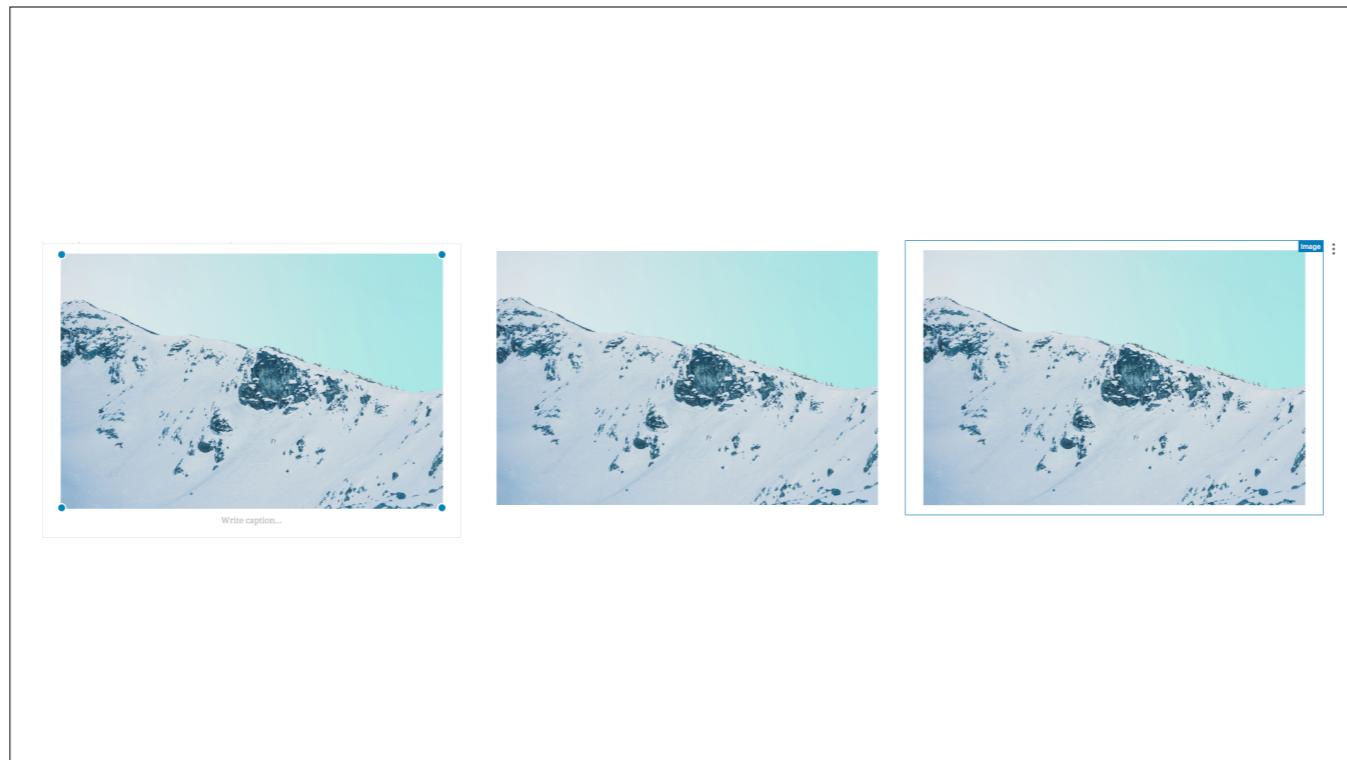
Blocks allow for a lot of 'drop in' functionality beyond the core blocks. The potential is really only just being touched as to what blocks can mean.



Placeholders are essential to in the new editing experience.

These indicate what a block is going to contain and have a few states.

Each state guides you through interaction. For example on first adding a block you get a call to in this case of the image block upload an image.



Placeholders can also be interacted with. This image block has an image you can resize right there and then.

The gallery block for example allows you to add captions.

These states are something you could take advantage of in a template. Imagine a template uploading showing all placeholders. This is a lot better than an empty large input box... nobody knows what to do with that. It's not indication of what the template will look like on the front and a confusing experience.

Placeholders progress those interacting towards WYSIWYG.

Direct manipulation

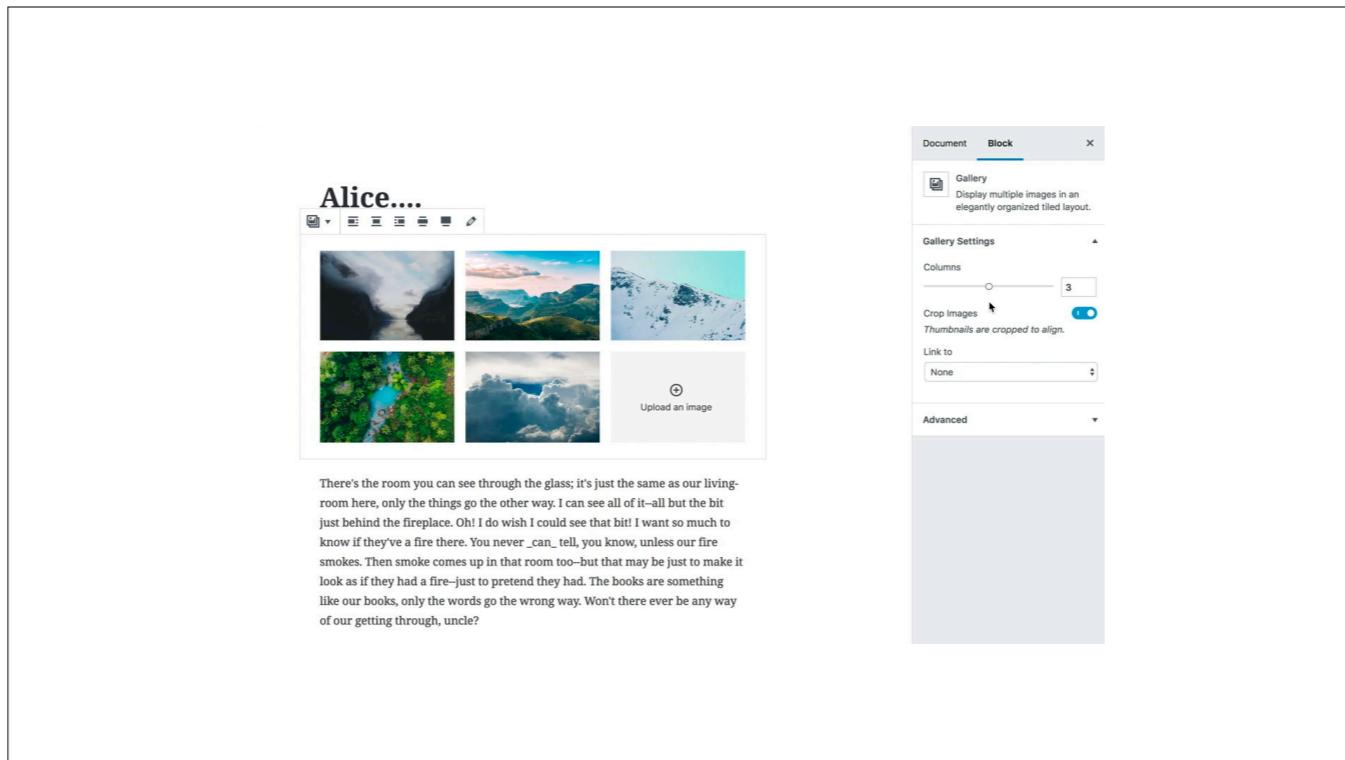


Another principle that threads through is that of direct manipulation.

What is this? Well in simple terms you see something and you can interact and see right there a change.

There is no wait, no pause. You change it, you see it.

This is one interface interaction most people expect now. We're so used to seeing this from apps through to the browser web. Touch devices have trained us to get this sort of direct feedback and we expect it everywhere.



Here you can see direct manipulation in Gutenberg.

You can make a change and see it right there in the block, even with a secondary action like this.

Seeing the change is so crucial to engagement as you are creating content.

Now you can do this right in the editor.

Need based options



If you want to eat soup you just want a spoon. You don't want to have a utensil with every single possibility all at once.. that just wouldn't work. Imagine the sheer size of that utensil! Our brains aren't built to have everything surfaced, we freeze. Likewise we aren't built to have to search endlessly, we grow impatient and reject an experience fast. Frustration leads to broken experience trust and nobody will want to use anything that destroys that. Being able to have just what you want, when you need it without hunting for options or being overwhelmed is something Gutenberg tries to achieve.



There are a few ways that this happens.

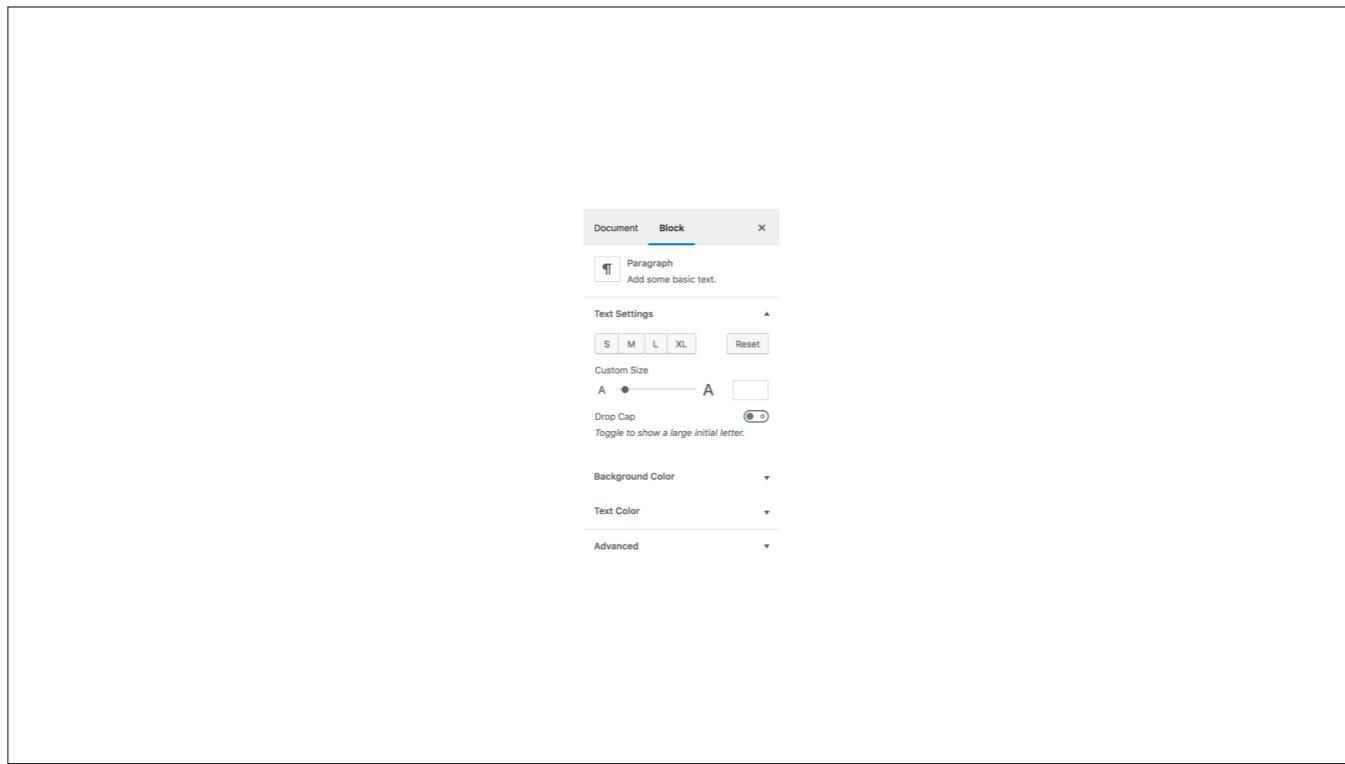
The biggest one is through primary and secondary actions for blocks.

Primary actions appear beside the block. These are the 'must have's', the things a block simply can't function without for the majority of people. The expected options.

They are there right where they are needed.

But unlike kitchen sink options, they aren't so many to overwhelm.

Just enough, nothing more.



Secondary actions are in the sidebar, reached by another key interaction element ‘the more menu’ using the ellipsis icon that is used commonly in other experiences.

Here you have extras, things it’s ok to discover as they aren’t essential to the usage of the block.

For example styling extras as seen in the paragraph block.

By following a needs based approach to options, the person creating the content feels more in control and by having the secondary actions exploration can happen too. Allowing for safe exploration is a key to interaction delight, for those extra options the secondary step makes absolute sense.

Experience matters

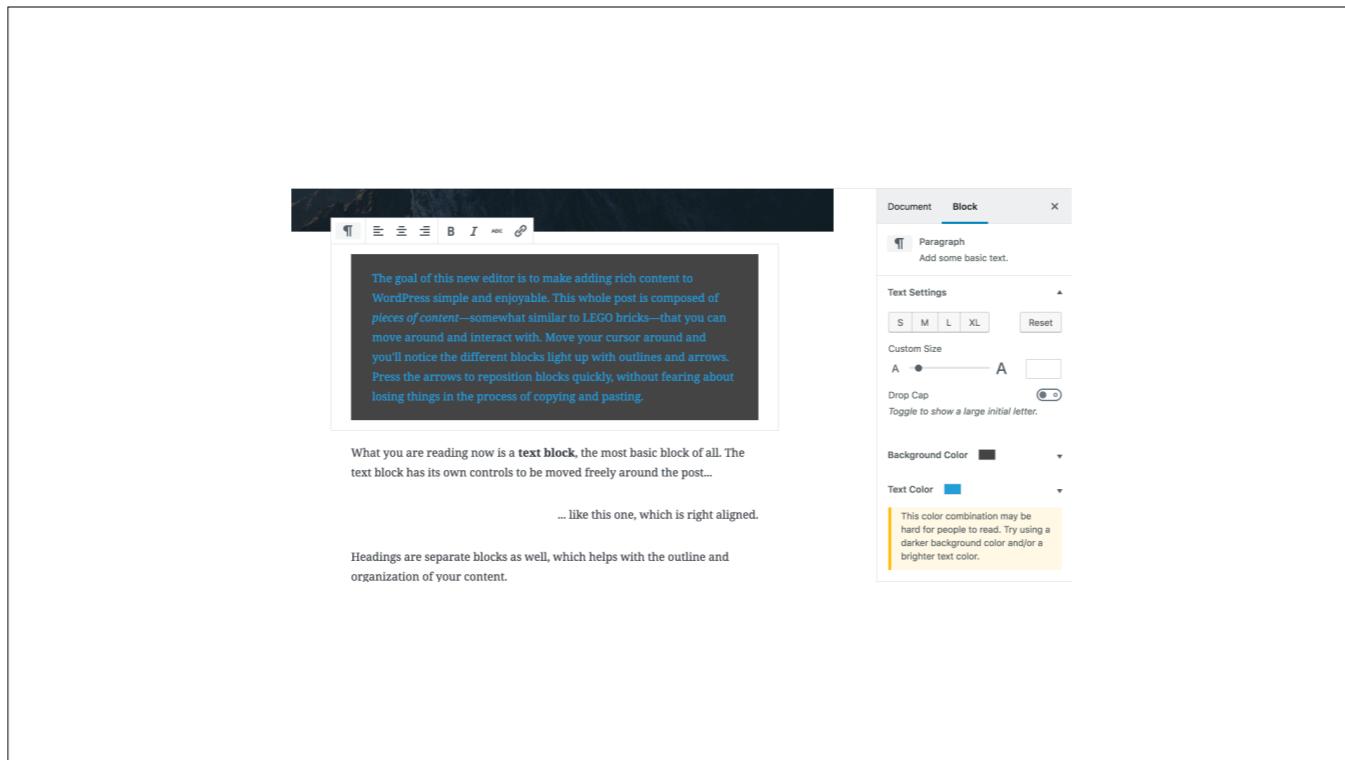


Experience covers a whole lot of things. However it is a foundation consideration in Gutenberg.

From the actual interface, to the performance, the delight, the copy... so many things make up what someone experiences and make up the experience in Gutenberg.

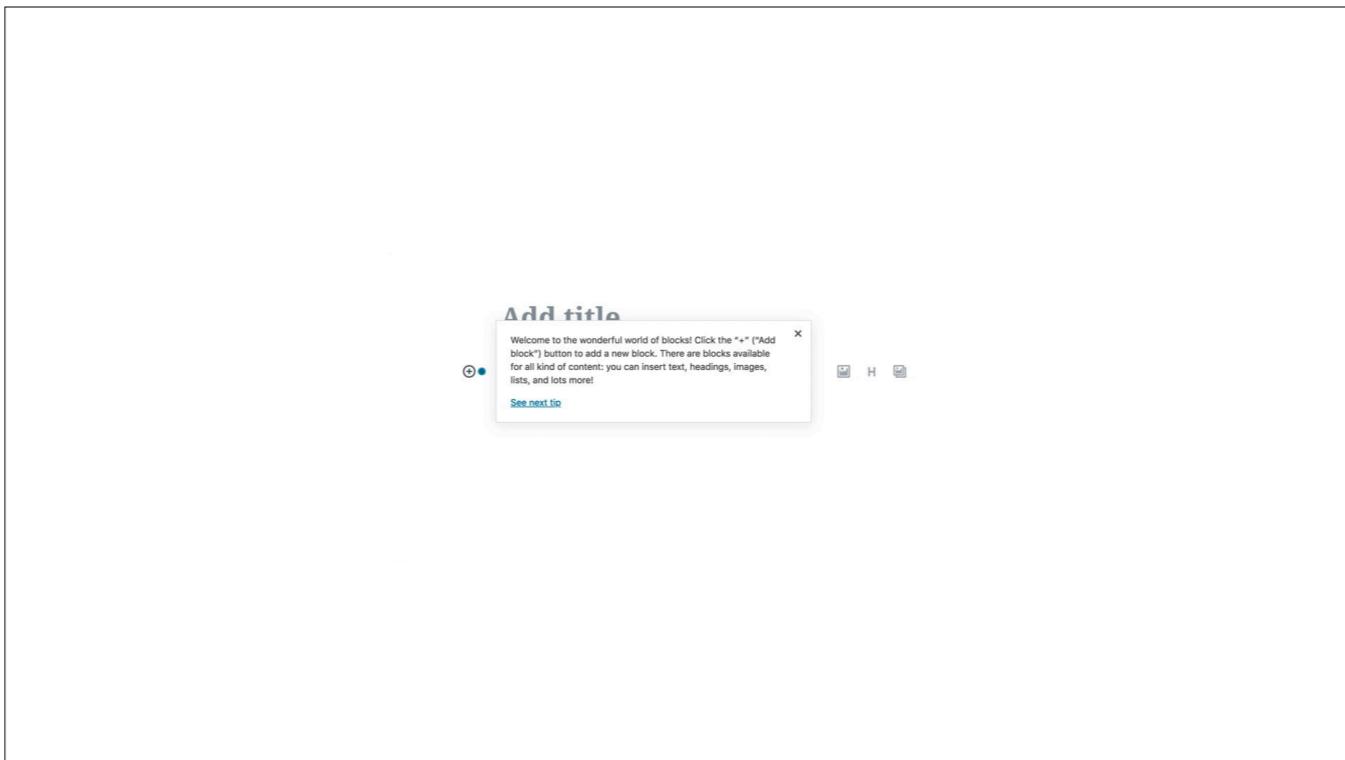
Improving this, making a better experience than the one in WordPress now, that's at the core of the work gone into this project.

WordPress right now has people coping to use it, with the new editor this can begin to change, they can thrive and grow with the experience.



Accessibility is a foundation to good experience. Not just for those you may think need it either, an accessible experience is better for everyone.

Gutenberg has had some incredible work done along the way (and it continues to be done) by the WordPress accessibility team. They have taught and guided those creating. Gutenberg does bring some new accessibility features itself like this one to check the color combinations. These little nudges are something to build on, a way to guide everyone to make a more accessible experience.

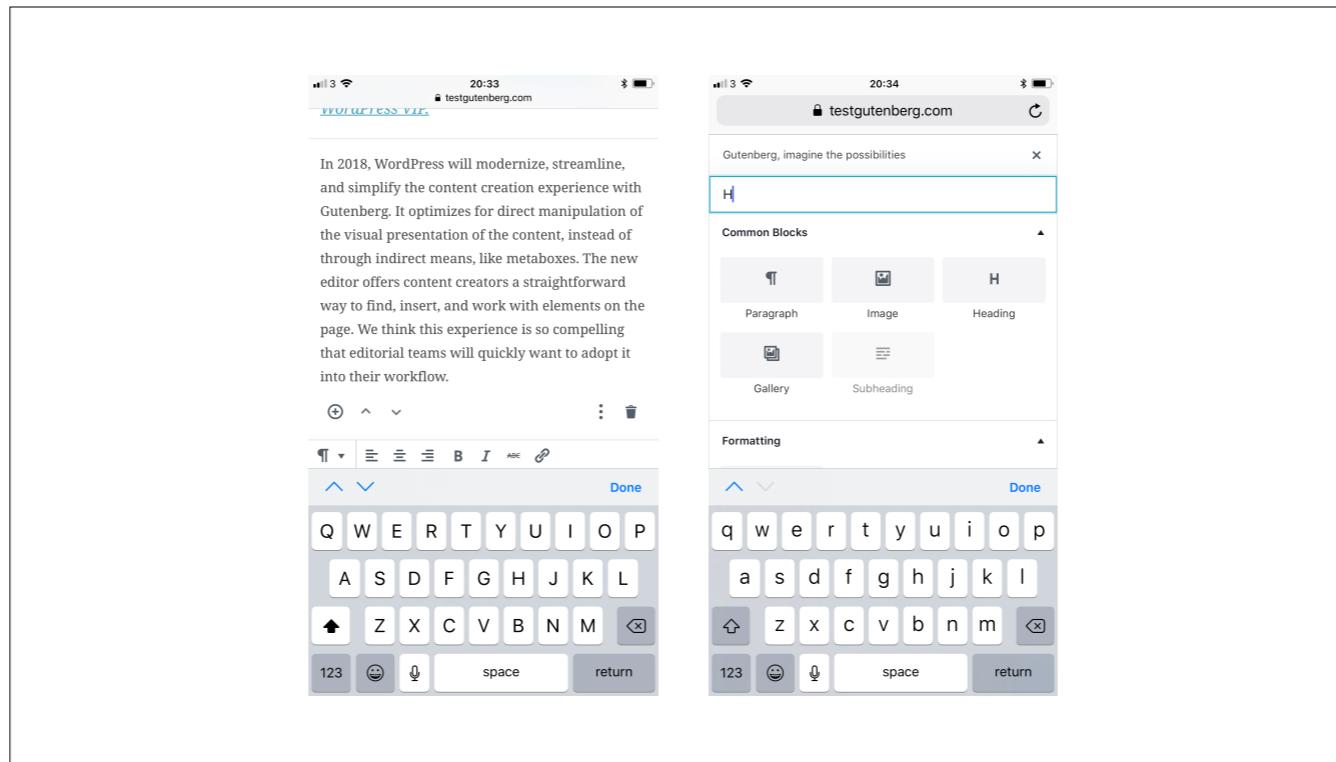


As I said at the start, the first experience of WordPress isn't that great. Within Gutenberg there is an attempt to respond to this with something called Tips.

What this does is a little welcome guide that takes you through some steps on first loading the editor.

This is planned to expand to little nudges, guides along the way to level up your experience.

Over time perhaps other areas of WordPress can start to get this kind of conversational interfaces.



The editor has to work well across any device. Now we often think of just the visual and say mobile. The truth is all manner of different devices can be used. Whilst for some things an app is the right choice, having it work well .. better than the current WP editing does on smaller screens is essential.

It's also worth noting as you move into thinking about mobile this is where performance really matters. If a site takes a long time to load it's pretty useless on a mobile device, primarily because of data plans but also because of sheer frustration using it.

Respect content



WP is built on backwards compatibility. Anything built has to respect past content made. It also has to respect things like blocks being in plugins or themes someone isn't using anymore. These graceful fallbacks and checks are built in.

Along with that it respects the changes you make in custom editing HTML. If all else fails and something goes wrong offering good default options like becoming a Classic Block - the editor in WP now - are offered.

The new experience also builds on existing principles within WP. There's a recognisable publishing flow, way to tag, categories images. Patterns from the old editor exists still like toolbar, sidebar and many other interactions.

Extendable



One of the survival traits arguably of WP is the way it can be extended. By code or by dropped in plugin, theme... WP can be moulded to be the experience anyone wants. Gutenberg is no different. You can at a low level add blocks. Beyond that there are so many ways you can extend. Plugins can do this and you can custom code experiences tailored just for a single case. Extensibility opens up a whole new world of creative more app like experiences within WordPress.

The Journey



I've so far said why this journey is needed. I also showed what is in the backpack, what are the foundations.

Let's move on and look at the journey, the path that Gutenberg has been on.

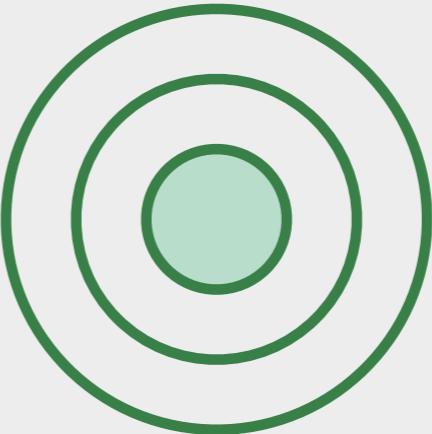
This all starts with the phases.

3 phases



There are 3 phases, let's take a look at each of these.

Editor

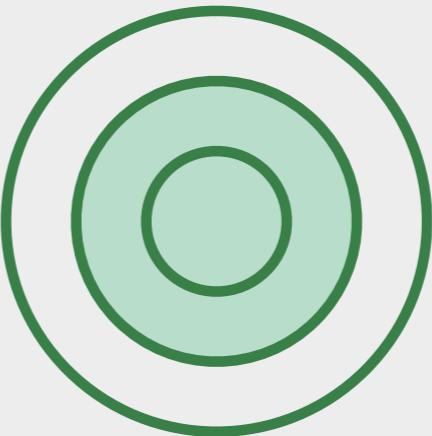


The editor is the first phase, the one we are in right now.

Whilst this is focusing on editing, the groundwork has been set for the next phases in the firsts.

This is the reason it's going to take longer most likely than the next ones.

Customization

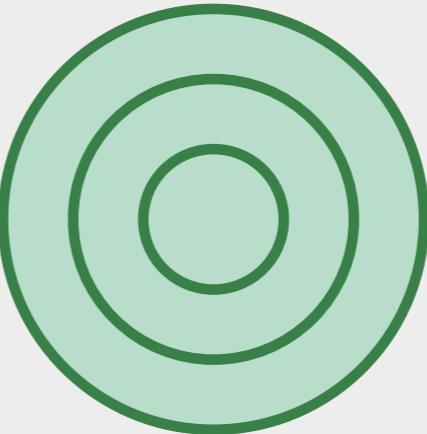


The next phase is Customization, This is where the more page builder aspects will occur.

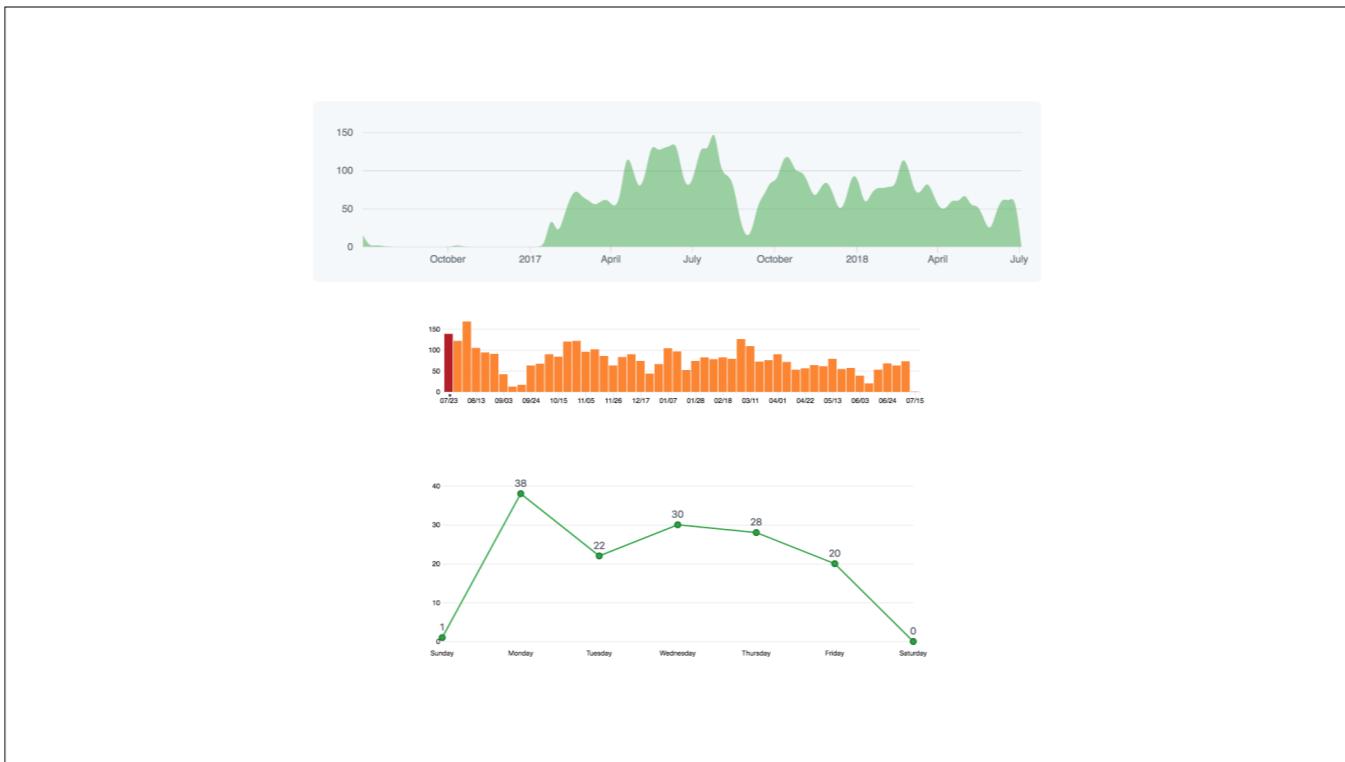
Rather than a hard stop in-between phases this next one will transition and overlap towards the end of phase one.

Likely this will also begin by looking at templating, one area of WP that is powerful but problematic to many.

Theme



The last phase is that of a theme. This will involve taking the work in the past two phases and creating a theme that showcases that. It's going to be a really exciting time to see this phase entered into.



Whilst stats on a GitHub repo only show a particular view this is what has happened so far.

The sheer number of issues and pull requests closed is incredible.

I love this bottom graph showing the commit activity a year ago.



August 29, 2017 : 1.0

Although 1 is just a number and there were released version before, Gutenberg 1.0 was reached on August 20 2017.

The project started a long time before that. It was worked on within a GitHub repo, as it is now. The team throughout meeting each week in #core-editor on the WP Slack. Release by release the project grew. Features were added and the numbers rolled around into the high 1's and then into 2.

30+
Releases

3, 128
closed issues

3, 861
closed PRS

So many people have contributed to this project.

This is going to be quite the props list when Gutenberg ships.

There have been more or less a release every few weeks over a year.

This has totalled over 30 releases and counting...

A huge benefit of blocks is that you can edit them in place and manipulate your content directly. Instead of having fields for editing things like the source of a quote, or the text of a button, you can directly change the content. Try editing the following quote:

The editor will endeavour to create a new page and post building experience that makes writing rich posts effortless, and has "blocks" to make it easy what today might take shortcodes, custom HTML, or "mystery meat" embed discovery.

Matt Mullenweg, 2017

The information corresponding to the source of the quote is a separate text field, similar to captions under images, so the structure of the quote is protected even if you select, modify, or remove the source. It's always easy to add it back.



July 6th 2018 : 3.2

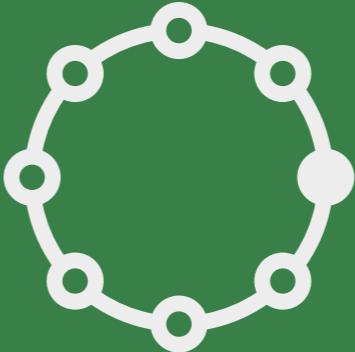
On July 6th 2018, 3.2 was reached and the project has reached feature complete.

This means all the minimum things wanted to get in for version one are there.

This is quite the milestone.

The team continues to meet in Slack each week, the conversations have grown and those contributing have grown significantly in numbers. Today as a project the focus is on bug fixing, iterating and responding to feedback as the project rounds the final corner.

Travellers

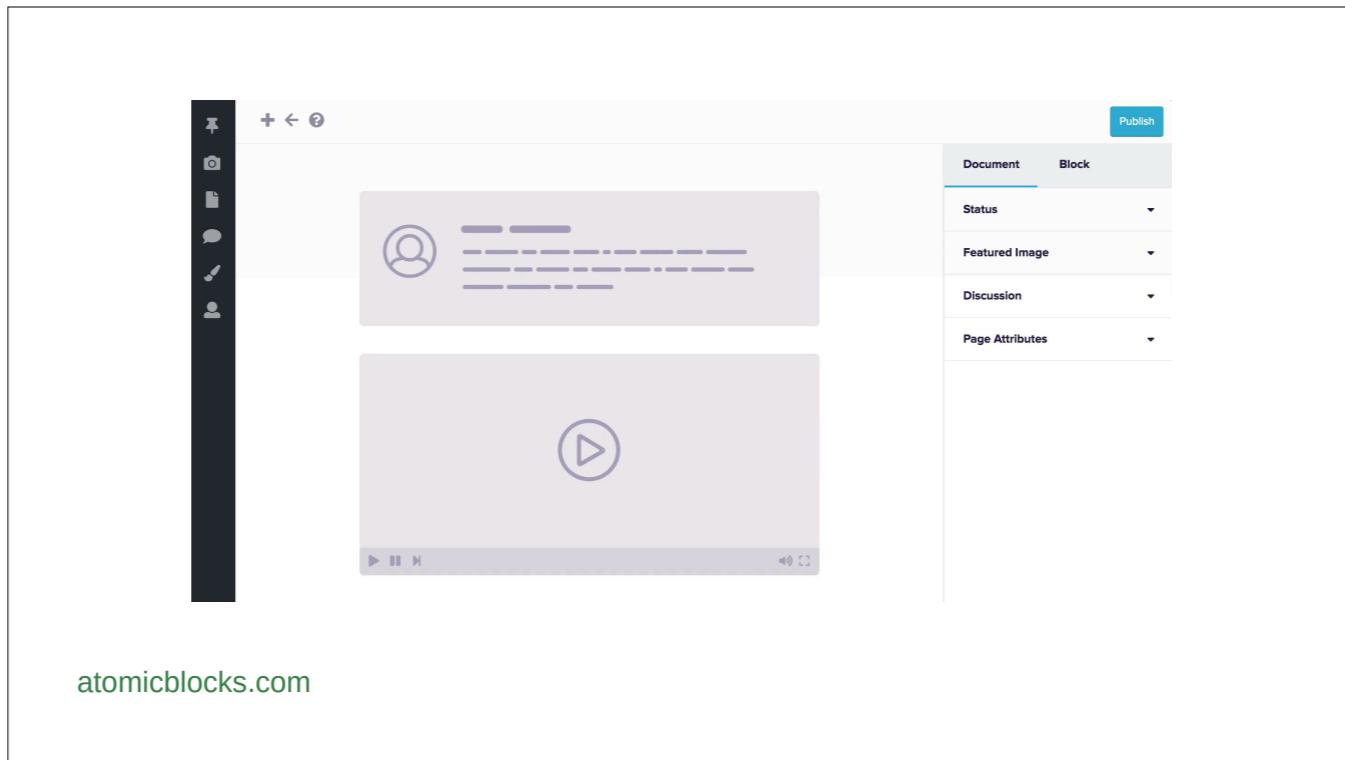


The project has been worked on through GitHub and in many ways this has allowed some new contributors to dive in. Both design and development has been done in the open, through issues and weekly meeting discussions.

Teams all across the WordPress project have also joined the journey, advising and contributing.

It's not just people contributing to the codebase itself though, many people have taken this as an opportunity for experimentation. They have used Gutenberg and as a result given feedback in ways that have shaped the direction.

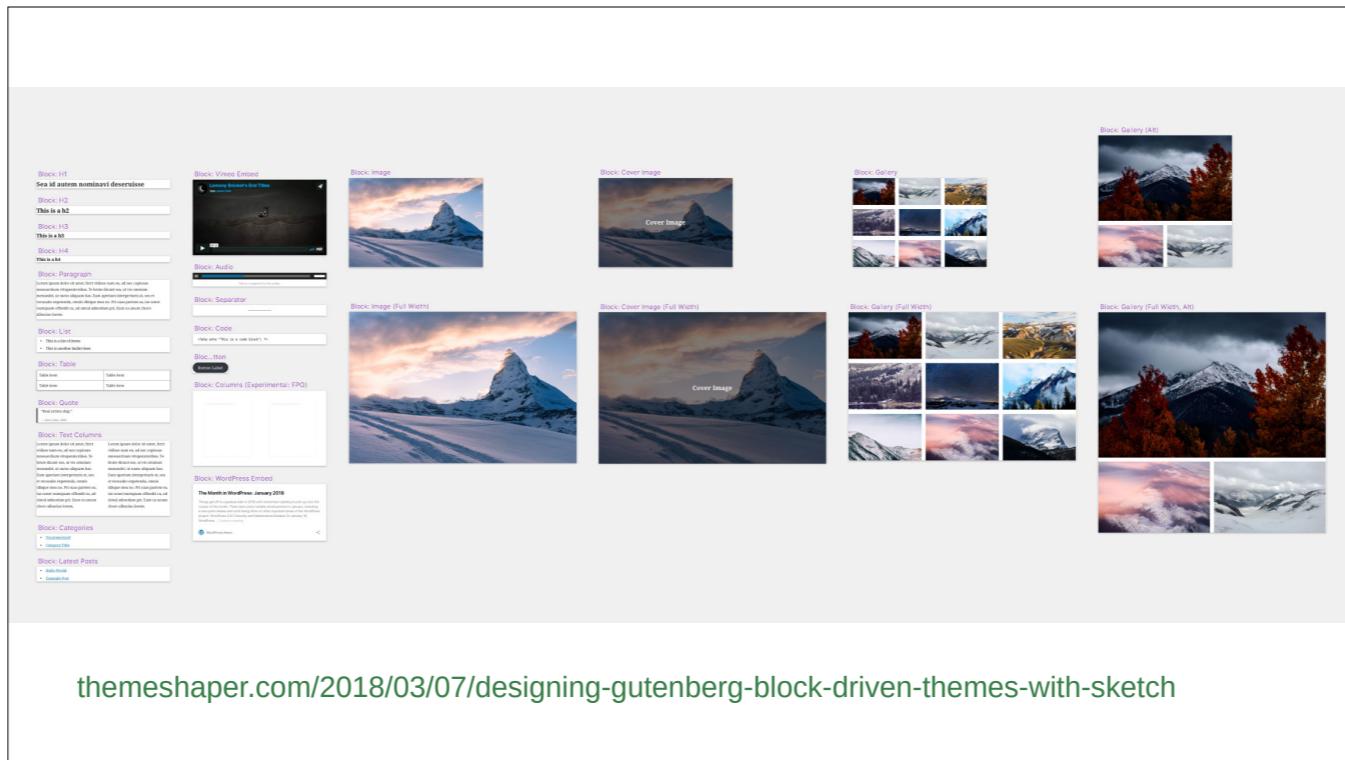
Similarly those agencies and freelancers who have become early adopters have made the product what it is today.



Atomic blocks is a great example of exploring what themes and blocks mean together.

There is a theme but also a suite of blocks in a plugin. This is really interesting and the approach I hope to see others adopting.

The atomic theme is available on [WP.org](#) theme repo and I'd encourage checking it out as even on its own it's a really good example of a theme that responds to Gutenberg.



themeshaper.com/2018/03/07/designing-gutenberg-block-driven-themes-with-sketch

As more people begin exploring what themes and plugins mean in a Gutenberg world, having tools around to jump in and use is very important. This sketch file and post is a really good example of exploring that.

It shows the faster theme creation future that is now unlocked through blocks.

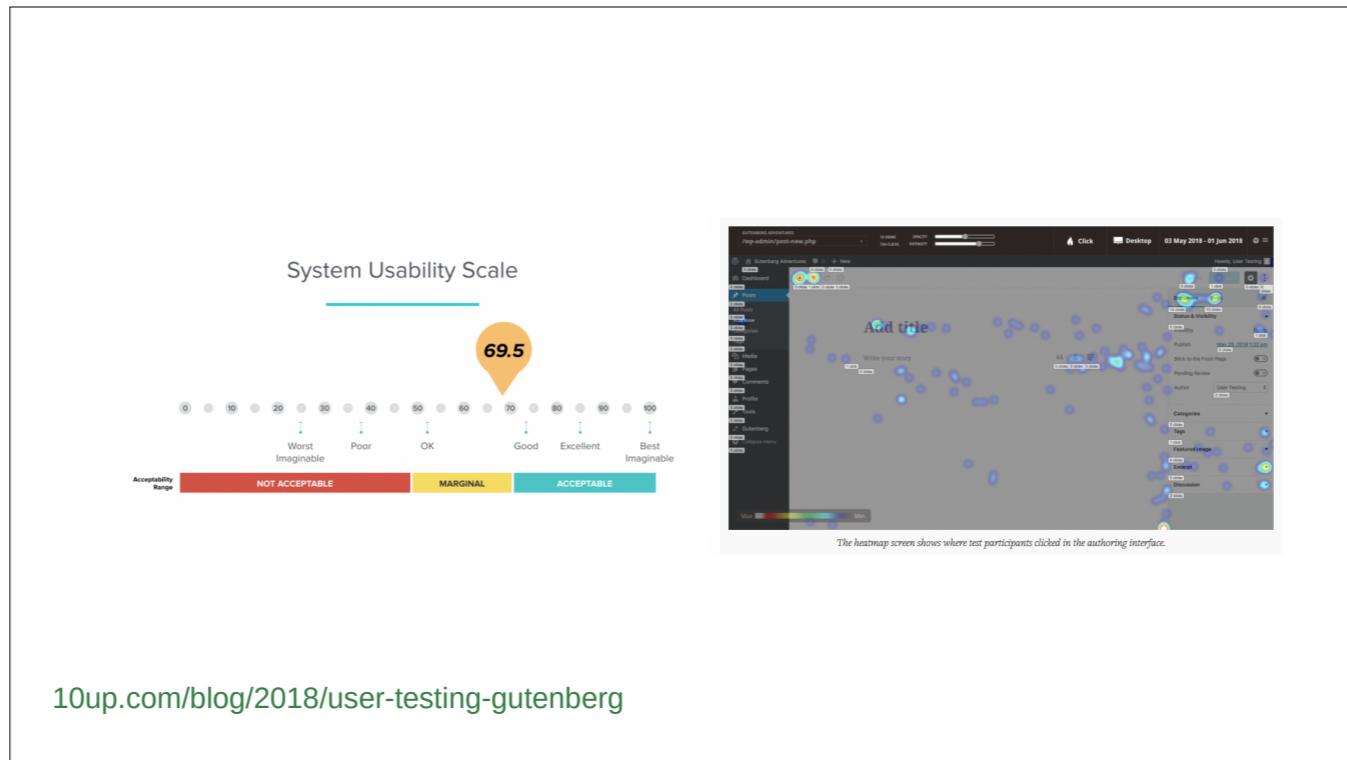


elio.blog/wordcamp-us-2017-nashville

Testing and feedback from that has been at the heart of this project. Shaping and moulding throughout the creation.

Throughout the entire life of the product so far feedback has been listened to and responded to from many sources.

Daily review feedback, usability tests, blog posts, issues.... The feedback has been from so many places too. From Universities through to having a usability testing booth at WordCamp US. Every single person that have given any feedback has helped make it what it is today.



Regarding feedback I wanted to call out just one of many blog posts and usability testing done in the community.

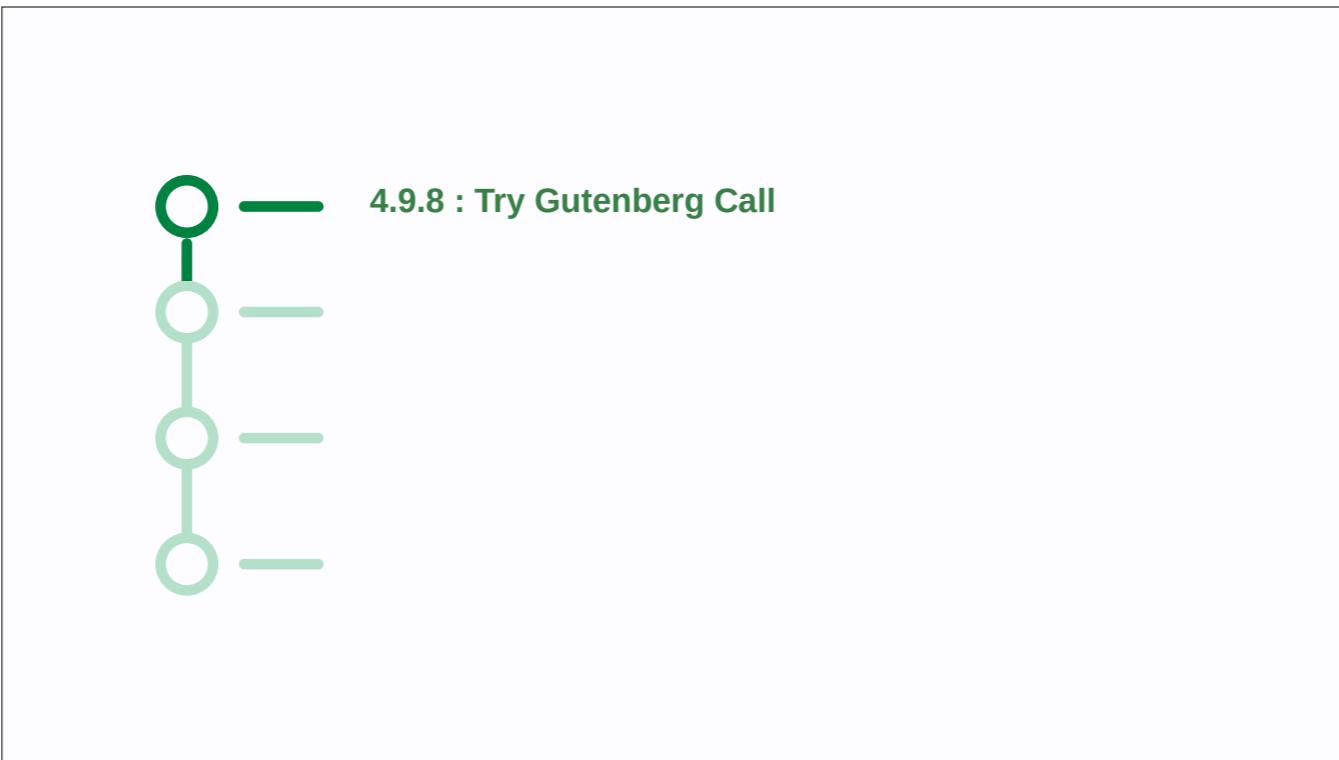
Sarah James from 10up ran some really great usability tests and wrote a really detailed post going through the feedback.

Through posts like this the product has and continues to be shaped. Keep your feedback coming and at the end I'll give a resources link of how you can do just that.

The Path Ahead



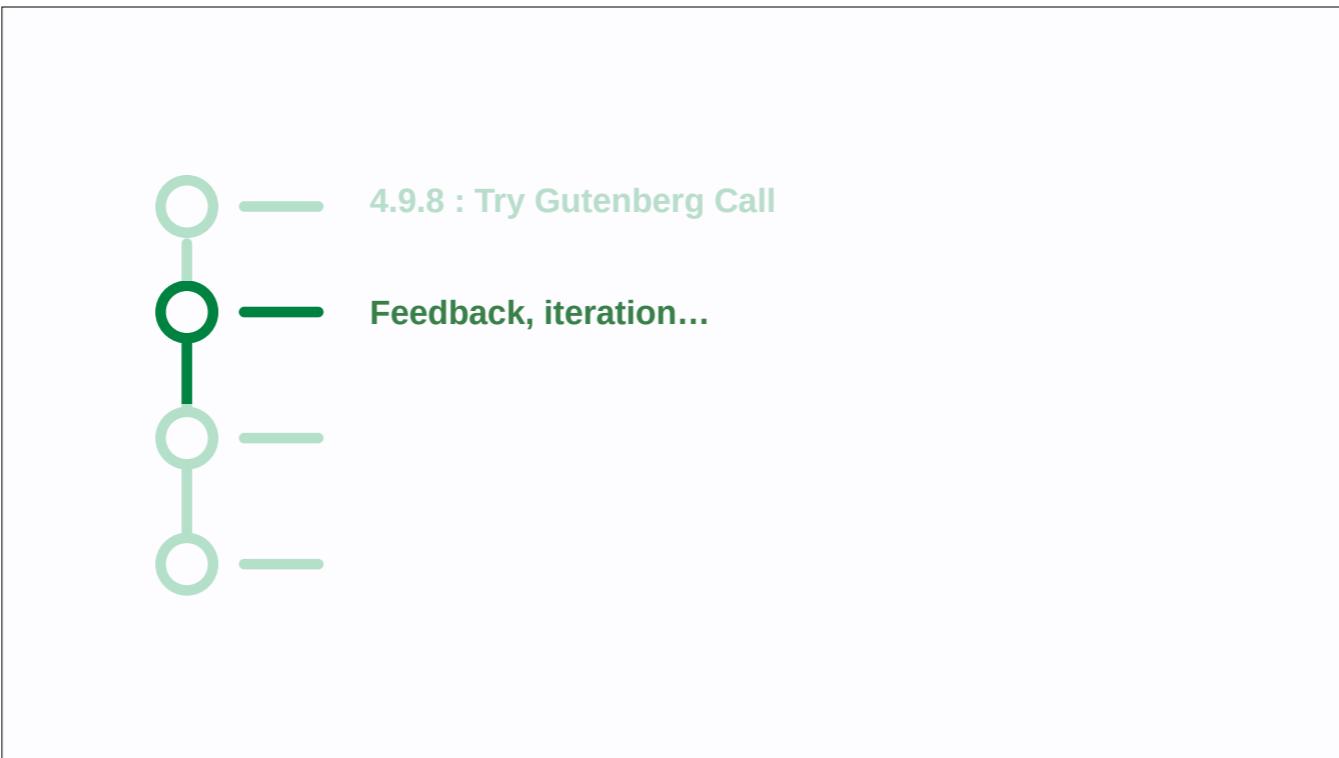
It's been quite a journey so far, but we're not done. There is some path left in phase one and the next 2 phases after that. But, what lies ahead? Where do we go now?



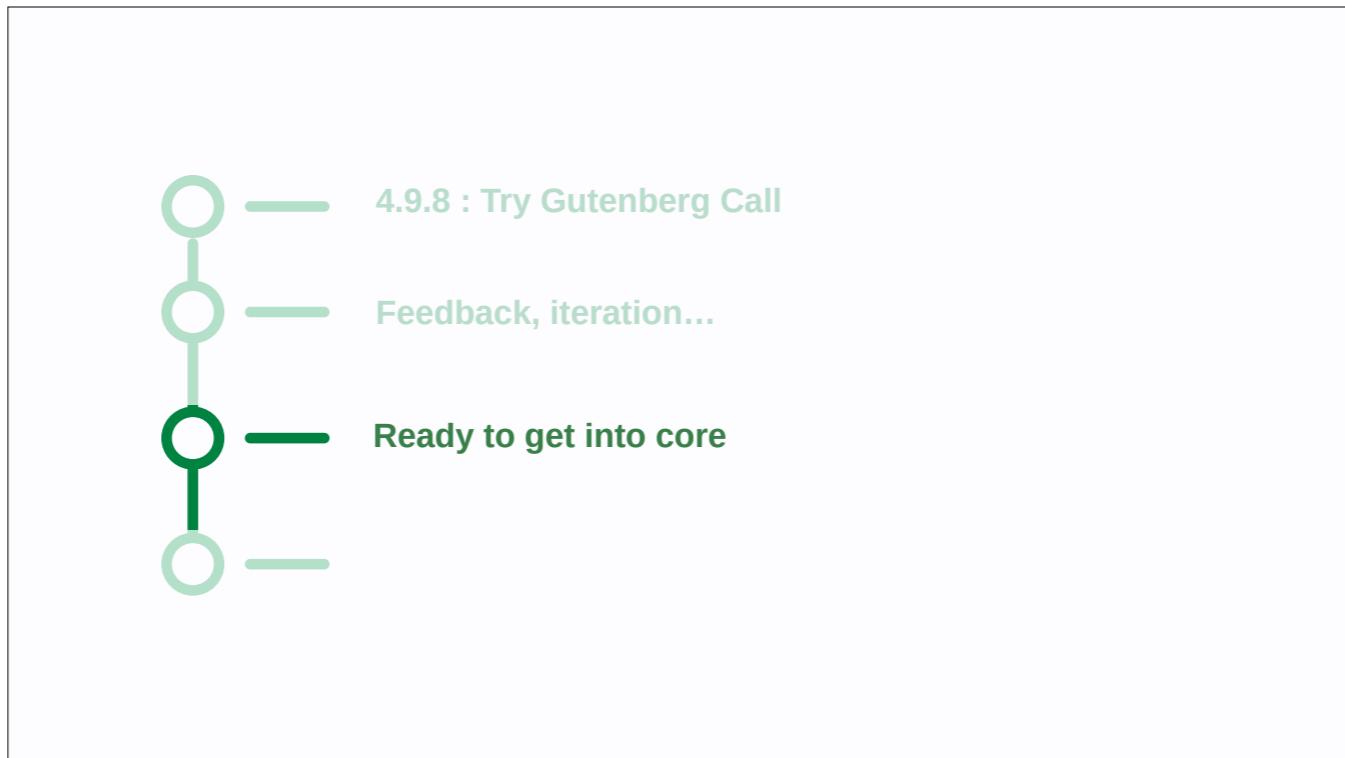
This is what the roadmap ahead roughly looks like.

The next stage is to open up the experience to more people. This will be done in 4.9.8 with the Try Gutenberg callout.

This encourages people to discover it how haven't before. It also has a notice to install the classic editor plugin for that maybe don't want the new experience in 5.0, which will potentially have it turned on by default.



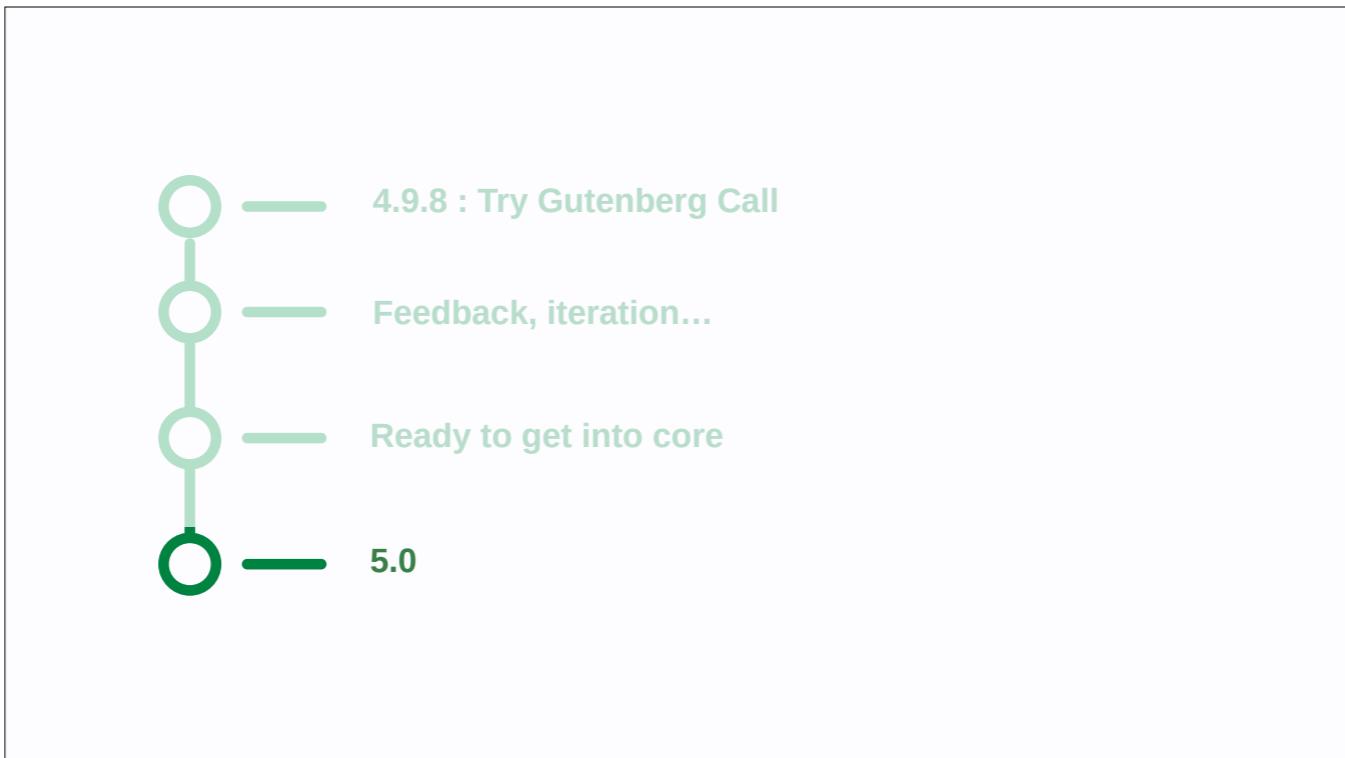
After that callout a period of feedback and iteration is entered. This is where all the wider feedback as more and more people experience the new editor is processed. Bugs will be fixed, stress cases soothed, flows smoothed. It will be a hectic time but it's needed to make sure on entering the next stage the best possible editor emerges.



After that frenetic time, a point will be reached where it's ready to get into core. This means the start of WordPress 5.0.

Just like any release this one will have a timeline, leads and also be done in public with posts and processes just the same as before.

There will be alpha and beta releases, leading all the way up to release client.



The big milestone after all of this is 5.0.

But, this is just the start of the journey as then the next phases are in full focus.

This is all expected to happen within the next few months, exact dates though are variable as you can likely understand a lot rests on what happens at each point.

The Future



That's a lot coming up. It's going to be a busy time for everyone involved in WordPress, but an exciting one too. It's been quite a journey to get to here.

What about the future though, I've outlined the phases but what exactly lies ahead.

I'm going to take some personal views here, these are things I likely think will be the future journey of Gutenberg.

In saying that though it won't be really Gutenberg at this point, it will be simply WordPress... the future here is the future of WordPress. After all Gutenberg is just the project name.



The theme elephant in the room has to be dealt with.

There is no excuse for themes to have everything in them.

My own feelings are we are likely to see themes shift more into being like style guides.

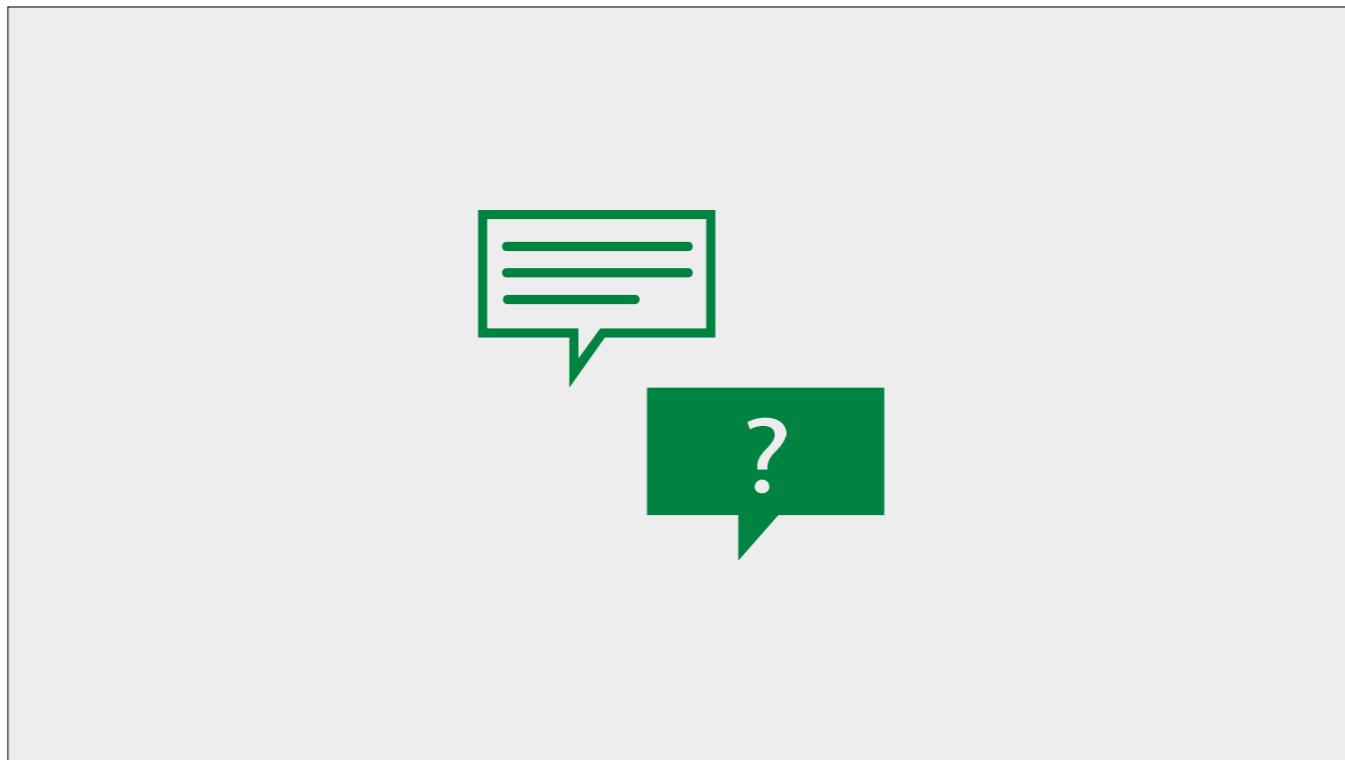
Maybe they become configuration files with those but nothing really more.

Themes always were best when supported not overwhelmed content and I see them moving back into that supporting role a lot more.



The Customizer and editor eventually will blur, where that line ends up being is yet to be seen and those leading the Customization phase will be guiding that. I've mentioned before direct manipulation and I see this only getting more and more important.

Themes will provide boundaries but the ultimate per content art direction will rightly be in the hands of those creating it. Of course just like with anything in WP user roles can channel this. However, out of the box anyone should be able to create beautiful posts. How those taste boundaries are set up is going to be a challenge but a great one to design around, enabling people to really take what they make with WP to the next level.



WordPress has to become more welcoming. It needs a new user experience. It needs things like Tips to expand out from the editor. This type of conversational interface is something people expect. It's no longer ok for someone to have to read an article or watch a tutorial to use something.

The interface should at least allow someone to take their first steps.

The experience should have a helpful personality not overwhelm and feel exclusionary.

Within Gutenberg the copy has been something focused on and as a project WP has to really step up that side too.

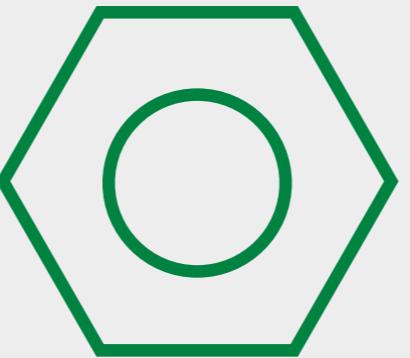


As a project we have to not retreat back into the bubble I mentioned earlier.

We can't be isolated. There are other planets discovered, they aren't going to be undiscovered if we ignore them.

The reality is those products doing the same or better are only going to grow.

This is good as a challenge to be answered. Being mindful of this is key though to progressing. This is getting us to where we should have been in many respects a few years ago, it's where we go from here that really decides the fate of WP.



WP has to be the right tool at the right time. This means from being the most accessible it can be through to performing well no matter on what or where you access it. This is a base requirement for any experience today and from now on.

Likewise continuing to refine with research and listening to those using, surfacing the right action at the right time can be refined.

A truly adaptive experience is one that works how you need it in a particular time. WP has its roots in adaption as a platform, this needs to be built on into the experience out of the box.

The Gutenberg Journey

As you can see it's been quite the journey from that first commit right up until today.

There is a little bit to go in this first part of the quest but the end of this chapter is close.

WordPress needs this project, with it the future is looking really bright. So many amazing people have come together as is the nature of WP and travelled along this Gutenberg journey. I'd like to say thank you to everyone that has so far and invite anyone that hasn't to come join us and help get this first chapter written.

Thanks, any questions?

Tammie Lister - @karmatosed

speakerdeck.com/tammielis/the-gutenberg-journey

karmatosed.github.io/talk-gutenberg-anatomyofablock/

Here are my slides and also a link to a presentation I've given in past with some resource links to discover Gutenberg a little more.