

Gritz/Fetch

A proposal for a student
blogging solution at UMBC

Original Idea and Design Document by James Gerity

Abstract

Gritz/Fetch is a hypothetical content publishing system that would allow all students and faculty in the myUMBC system to share ideas and opinions in a free manner, utilizing the General Labs (GL) framework that is already in place.

The point behind Gritz is to decentralize the mouthpiece for the student body (and to a lesser extent, other members of the myUMBC system, like faculty) in order to promote the exchange of thoughts.

Gritz/Fetch is composed of two separate systems acting together: a blogging facility (Gritz) allowing posting and display of articles, and an aggregation system (Fetch) that collects new articles from every user in the system, displaying them in a manner personalized to each user's preferences.

In layman's terms, the combination of Gritz and Fetch lets anybody at UMBC write about what they want to write, and helps them find what people are saying about a particular topic, and what topics are being heavily discussed



Illustration 1: An example of what a configured user blog might look like under Gritz

Structure

Two unique pieces of software are the key to Gritz's approach to user content: the blog system (Gritz itself), and the global feed (Fetch).

- **Gritz: The Blossom-based Core**

The core of Gritz is a content publishing system based off the free software package, Blossom.¹ Blossom, in the words of the developer, is “*a lightweight yet feature-packed weblog application designed from the ground up with simplicity, usability, and interoperability in mind.*” It makes publishing simple; any text file in a particular directory (or set of directories) is treated as a post, and appears on the main blog display.

Blossom, however, is primitive as a package. It is designed for a fairly knowledgeable user-base, who can find their way around the software and change it to suit their needs. The average college student does not have the time and skill required to do this. Therefore, the focus of the Gritz project is to expand Blossom and make it more user-friendly, so that publishing becomes easy and intuitive. The interface for editing and adding posts could be integrated into the myUMBC system for ease of use.

The Gritz software would be made a standard part of every user account on UMBC's General Labs (GL) servers, which already provide users with a personal website on UMBC's servers.

¹ [Blossom - http://www.blossom.com/](http://www.blossom.com/)

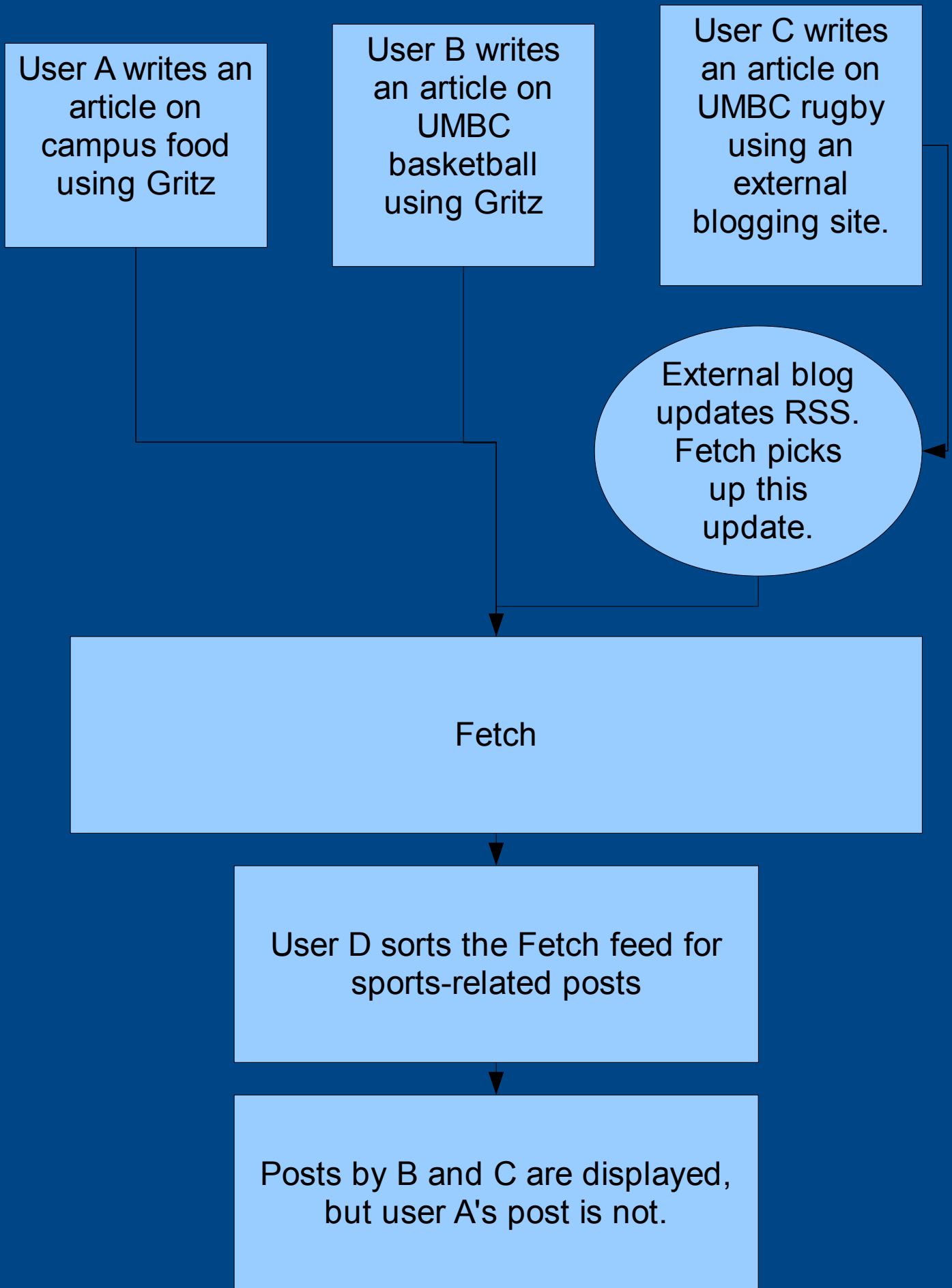
- **Fetch: The Global Feed**

Providing an authoring and publishing system for user content is a big step towards empowering the student body, but it does not answer the question of *finding* the opinions of others. By tradition, blogs become popular by word of mouth, a very slow method of spreading sources of new ideas and opinions.

Instead, Fetch aims to provide this infrastructure from the very beginning. Each post made using Gritz is added to the Fetch system (users should be able to elect out of this method for individual posts or categories), where other users can see it. Posts can be rated by logged-in users, and sorted based on rating. Users can also filter the global feed to show only content they want to see (particular categories, keywords, etc.).

Posts from blogs outside the Gritz system can be added by myUMBC users via Really Simple Syndication (RSS),² a format used online to keep track of published materials, such as blogs. These added feeds may come from various blog services and software, but as long as their blog can support RSS, this standard format will allow inclusion into Fetch. Every hour or so, Fetch will check all external sources for new posts by updating the RSS feed, and will then add in any new posts from outside the system.

By creating a central 'portal' where all users can find new content published by UMBC users, Fetch provides a way to organize the content of Gritz without disrupting its individuality.



A flowchart depicting a simple example of the Gritz/Fetch system