Wikis and Participatory Fandom
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There are few technological developments that had more of a visible impact on participatory culture in the 2000s than the wiki. Although the software was designed for small-scale and local uses, wikis have emerged as a major tool used by internet users on a daily basis. From the world's most popular encyclopedia, Wikipedia, to hundreds of specialized sites serving a vast array of subcultures and groups, wikis have become one of the hallmark tools of the participatory internet, or Web 2.0. This article will outline the development of wikis as a software platform and the cultural rise of Wikipedia before considering a range of participatory practices tied to one of the most widespread uses of wikis: as a tool for online fandom.

The rise of the wiki and Wikipedia

Wikis date back to the earliest years of the World Wide Web. As the WWW was emerging as a public platform in the early-1990s, software developer Ward Cunningham was looking for a easy-to-use tool to enable collaborative conversations about programming ideas. His solution was WikiWikiWeb, named after the Hawaiian word "wiki" meaning "quick." Launched in 1995 to facilitate discussions among programmers, Cunningham's wiki software followed a few basic principles that are still in use among most wikis today. A wiki is designed to be viewed in any web browser, from primitive applications of the 1990s to contemporary browsers used on mobile devices and laptops. Rather than serving as "read-only" sites requiring HTML coding to make changes, wikis function as "read/write" sites, allowing multiple editors to make changes from within their browser directly without any direct HTML coding. The wiki software displays content to anyone accessing the site like most webpages, but allows fast editing and access to revision history at the click of a button.

Cunningham designed the wiki software as an alternative to the most common online group communication tools used in the early-1990s, email listservers and USENET bulletin boards, by organizing content around individual pages that display the most recent edited version. For programmers working on shared projects, the wiki system was an efficient way to track and discuss ongoing progress. Cunningham released his free software to create stand-alone wikis, and both Cunningham's system and alternate wiki platforms became popular tools for communities of programmers in the late-1990s, especially amongst open-source advocates who believed in making their work public and accessible to various contributors on Cunningham's own WikiWikiWeb, spinoff sites like MeatballWiki, and numerous other wikis dedicated to specific programming languages and software systems.

As is frequently the case with technologies, the intended purpose for the tool was soon eclipsed by an unanticipated use. In 2001, a team developing an online encyclopedia created a wiki to help develop content for their main site, NuPedia. Their intent with this secondary site, Wikipedia, was to serve as an open "sandbox" for editing articles to include in their more traditionally single-authored and peer-reviewed Nupedia site. However, the site got noticed by technology sites Slashdot and Kuro5hin, generating a flood of interested contributors – in its first year, Wikipedia editors had developed over 20,000 entries, compared to only 24 articles to successfully pass through Nupedia's editorial process. While

certainly many of the Wikipedia articles were of questionable quality, the robust results that emerged from the unintended opening up of the authorship and editing process led to the demise of Nupedia and charted a path for how wikis might be used beyond a small-scale tool for programmers.

Wikipedia was so successful that it became the prototype for the widespread use of wikis across a range of sites, and fueled the popularity of the platform for mass adoption. Shortly after launching, Wikipedia's team developed a new wiki software platform to run the site, and the emerging community of Wikipedia contributors established a set of rules and guidelines to manage the site's processes and content. For many outsiders who have not actively edited a wiki, it seems counterintuitive that a site with no top-down governance, no formal system for delegating tasks, and a crew of almost all volunteer, amateur writers and editors could create the largest encyclopedia ever made with a level of accuracy that many studies have suggested rival or surpass traditional encyclopedias for accuracy. But by looking closely at Wikipedia's editorial model, we can better understand how wikis function as a site of participatory culture.

One important guiding principle behind Wikipedia and most other wikis is that they embrace **freedom**. When discussing software, there are two important related meanings of free: no cost and open. Wikipedia embraces both meanings, as the site is hosted by a non-profit foundation and refuses to sell advertising or charge access to its site or software, and Wikipedia is open to any user, editor, or derivative use with few limitations. The effect of these dual freedoms is that Wikipedia embraces an open access approach to both the use and creation of its site, making the project truly dependent on participation and self-governance, rather than top-down or commercial control. Wikipedia licenses its content with a Creative Commons system that waives some of the restrictions tied to copyright, ensuring that all content is accessible, sharable, and not claimed by any individual owner. Not all wikis follow this form of complete openness, but the precedent of Wikipedia helps makes the assumed default model for wikis tend toward free and open access.

A related principle to the freedom of wikis is **transparency**, a facet encoded directly into wiki software itself. Most documents, whether a book or a webpage, hide the work that went into their creation – you can only view a final, finished draft, with little evidence of the process behind the document's origination. Wikis make the traces of their creation visible and accessible to users. Within the Mediawiki software as well as many other wiki platforms, every page has two important linked tabs: *History* and *Discussion*. The History page allows any user to view every individual edit made to the page, tracking who added what content and how the site evolved. The Discussion tab hosts a conversation about the page, as editors decide on potential categories, negotiate over controversial edits, and consider sources. Together, every page in Wikipedia can be viewed both as a published encyclopedia entry and as part of an ongoing process of creation. For editors, this transparency serves as a guide to join the participatory community and facilitate collaboration.

The transparency of a wiki highlights another key facet of the format: a page is always in process, embracing **fluidity** over static form. Most print texts are published only after rounds of writing, revision, editing, and formatting, with the final version fixed as part of a permanent record. Conventional websites go through an intense development, editing, and testing process before“ going live,” even if they get revised eventually. But wiki pages are drafted in

public – when a new event, person, or notable term emerges as a candidate for a Wikipedia page, an editor simply creates a new page, typically a short entry called a *stub*. Editors then congregate to expand and refine the page, debate its notability, or potentially to delete it altogether, all within the visible public-facing site. This process is never fully complete, as a Wikipedia page could always be refined, updated, merged with another, or deleted. Unlike print texts, Wikipedia is never fixed or static, but is always part of a fluid process of revision.

For people who have not edited a wiki, it is hard to understand how the process avoids devolving into chaos – the average Wikipedia page certainly looks like it was planned and authored by experts, not collectively built by amateurs. But Wikipedia pages are an example of an important trend of participatory culture: **emergence**. Instead of being planned and managed from above, emergent culture is a bottom-up phenomenon, coming together through the collection of small practices. Like birds flocking and ant colonies, Wikipedians organize their work without following top-down orders. Instead, they collectively decide on shared principles and goals, like style sheets, formatting norms, and guidelines for what makes a good entry, and then each editor follows their own interests and talents. Some editors focus on formatting, others on source citation, and others on grammar. Some have specialty topic areas they work on, while others police the site for vandalism and controversy. While pages are rarely seen as the property of any individual editor, each editor finds their own unique way to contribute the site as a whole, and the entire complex system emerges out of decentralized individual participation.

The effect of accumulating the diverse participation of a wide range of encyclopedia writers and editors fits with the important concept of **collective intelligence**. Through their media analyses, Pierre Lévy and Henry Jenkins have explored how the knowledge and expertise of computer users can come together through digital tools to exceed their individualized contributions. Wikipedia might be the greatest testament to this principle, as most pages exceed the knowledge and abilities of any one editor; instead, each adds their own expertise to create what is arguably the most expansive and accurate compendium of information ever assembled.

The final important aspect of wikis stems from these emergent collected practices: **relative anonymity**. While most research materials like books and articles are clearly identified by their authors, and even traditional encyclopedias credit authors and editors, Wikipedia articles lack attribution. The History tab will reveal who did what, but typically there are numerous editors, each with a username or an anonymous IP address. Although some Wikipedians create elaborate profiles, complete with academic or other credentials to validate their expertise, the vast majority of editors contribute anonymously or pseudonymously with little chance of recognition from the millions of readers who consult the site on a regular basis. Entries do need to cite external sources for validity, but within the site, expertise is tied to active participation within the Wikipedia community rather than an authorial identity – a good page is judged on its own merits, not by the credentials of who authored it. Likewise, writing an excellent entry is less of a badge of accomplishment on Wikipedia than in traditional publishing, with other participatory practices like cleaning up messy entries, adding source citations, deleting vandalism, weighing in on policies, and negotiating conflicts valued more than single authorship.

These six principles – freedom, transparency, fluidity, emergence, collective intelligence, and

relative anonymity – apply to most wikis that are open to the general public. But for users familiar with Wikipedia, these are not the core principles typically associated with the site. Instead, Wikipedia's guidelines and "pillars" highlight that content needs to be presented with a neutral point-of-view, citing sources and avoiding original research, among other administrative policies. These are vital principles for Wikipedia, but derive more from its role as a comprehensive encyclopedia, not in its form as a wiki. Because Wikipedia has become so well-known, it has come to define what a wiki is in the popular imagination. People frequently refer to looking something up on Wikipedia as "wikiing," suggesting that the wiki structure is often culturally equated with its encyclopedic function, a semantic mix-up between the *wiki-* and the *-pedia*. But the actual use of other wikis often go beyond the encyclopedic impulse.

Fan Wikis as Participatory Culture

The wiki platform is open to a wide range of uses beyond creating an encyclopedia. Wikis can serve a small private group, such as an internal corporate authoring tool or an academic class project. They can be used to share information to trace genealogies, like Familypedia, or to collect and disseminate secret documents, as with WikiLeaks. One of the most popular and widespread uses of wikis has been to augment fandom, especially around popular culture. Hundreds of wikis have been developed to serve as productive sites for fans to engage around objects of their affection, including television shows, video games, films, literature, comic books, sports, music, and virtually any other facet of popular culture that attracts active fans. Fan wikis provide a window into a range of participatory practices and cultural formations.

Before surveying the array of fan wikis, it's important to understand what makes a fan wiki distinct from other sites. Although it's not a firm boundary, we can best understand fan culture as existing principally in relation to another external cultural object, whether a film, sports team, or band. Other subcultural formations can coalesce around a practice (such as a knitting circle) or set of beliefs (like a bible discussion group), but fan groups define themselves as primarily connected to the object of their fandom. This can be a slippery distinction, as we would probably not consider a general interest book club as part of fan culture, but a reading group focusing on the *Harry Potter* series would be. The key aspect for fan culture is that participants have an emotional engagement with a shared cultural form, dedicating their time, money, and creative energies to exploring that relationship.

For fan groups who create wikis, there are a wide range of styles and functions for their sites. But regardless of their specific motivations, all fan wikis can be considered **paratexts**, independent cultural works that exist in relation to other texts. Most works of popular culture have officially licensed paratexts created by the media industries – a film might have trailers, tie-in merchandise like toys or T-shirts, DVD extras, sequels, and licensed media adaptations such as videogames or novelizations. Fans create their own unlicensed paratexts inspired by popular culture as well, including fan fiction, remix videos, artworks, songs, and a wide array of websites. Fan wikis, given the ease of their editing interfaces and simplicity of collaboration, have emerged as a popular platform for developing online paratexts for nearly every fan community.

Fan wikis can be used to serve a number of functions. Most fan wikis serve, at least in part, as **documentation** of their cultural object. For objects of fandom that, for lack of a better term,

might be called non-fictional, like sports teams or a musical act, wikis assemble information about the real people, places, events, and other elements that capture a fan's attention. For instance, the various Beatles wikis all attempt to chronicle information about the band's songs, history, and personalities. However, few fan wikis can rival Wikipedia's depth and detail in chronicling information about a non-fiction topic – Wikipedia has much more information about The Beatles than any of the dedicated Beatles wikis. Such imbalances are understandable given Wikipedia's enormous user base and well-established community and practices for documenting the real world, whether scientific discoveries or British rock bands.

The balance shifts somewhat for fictional works like films, television series, videogames, and comic books. While Wikipedia does contain entries on fictional stories, places, and characters, a key tension among Wikipedians involves the concept of *fancruft*, a derogatory term meaning overly-detailed information that is seen as only relevant to the most passionate fans. Wikipedians frequently debate whether pages chronicling the fictional worlds of anime or videogames require the level of detail that some desire, often making the site inhospitable to hardcore fans of fiction that it rarely is for fans of non-fictional topics. In such cases, fan wikis dedicated to documenting fictional storyworlds, as well as the real-life information about the creation of the cultural objects themselves, serve as a gathering place for fan participation. Some of the most popular fan wikis include WoWWiki (for the game franchise *Warcraft*), Wookiepedia (*Star Wars*), Memory Alpha (*Star Trek*), and wikis for Marvel and DC comics, anime series *Yu-Gi-Oh!*, *Doctor Who*, and the Muppets. While all of these topics have elaborate sets of pages created within Wikipedia, their stand-alone fan wikis thrive as spaces to document their fictional worlds with elaborate detail.

A contrast between wikis highlights the differing level of detail and fan participation – with the caveat that their fluidity means that these descriptions might no longer be accurate in the future. On Wookiepedia, the minor character Daultay Dofine has an independent page of 3,500 words developed by more than twenty editors, chronicling his small role in *The Phantom Menace* and further development in various tie-in novels and published *Star Wars* references; the page was awarded Featured Article status in 2009, the community standard of excellence on many wikis. On Wikipedia, the Daultay Dofine page, which was never longer than 600 words and referenced only the film, was the site of a debate between users as to whether it deserves its own page or should be merged with a page that lists minor *Star Wars* characters. Eventually it was deleted, redirecting users to a list of characters, on which Dofine doesn't even appear as of September 2010. This contrast shows how dedicated *Star Wars* fans use the niche Wookiepedia to create and value content with a vast amount of detail and precision, even if the same content is viewed as fancruft within the general audience for Wikipedia.

It is telling that many of the most active and extensive fan wikis focus on large-scale franchises that span multiple media and decades of cultural output. Documenting such vast narrative franchises typically require collective intelligence, as the range of content typically exceeds any single fan's mastery. Wikis are highly effective platforms for encouraging active participation for fans to pool their expertise, but their relative anonymity does run counter to one facet of fandom: the hierarchy of status amongst collectors and experts that traditionally has been central to many fan communities. An average user of a fan wiki does not drill down into the history and discussion to identify the most trusted and accomplished expert fans, and thus some fans who are motivated by status-seeking amongst the community might prefer stand-alone authored fansites or other paratextual practices over collective wikis.

Within a fan wiki community, other hierarchies frequently emerge that do not necessarily mimic the status of fan expertise. Most wikis empower selected editors to function as System Operators (Sysops) or Administrators (Admins), roles that include expanded editing, blocking, and policy-setting functions. A wiki establishes its own policies for selecting Sysops and banning destructive users, but typically such decisions are made following collectively established policies and guidelines that value a user's contributions to maintaining order and collaboration. Once in place, Sysops help define the culture of a wiki, which can be overtly structured and hierarchical or much more egalitarian and collective. Thus while an individual fan's expertise is rarely granted high value within a wiki community like in other fan cultures, wikis do provide validation for fans who can effectively foster consensus and collective participation rather than individual achievements.

Documentation of a cultural object is one major function of fan wikis that follows directly from precedents established by Wikipedia, but fan wikis can host a much broader range of participation and cultural production than the encyclopedic impulse. On sites focused on fictional worlds, fan wikis can serve as **alternative narratives**, retelling the canonical story of a franchise in a new form. A fan could read Wookiepedia, Lostpedia, or Memory Alpha as a retelling of the stories from their respective fictional franchises, much like annotated versions, synopses, and reference books retell classic literature and mythology. While it's hard to imagine somebody who has never watched the show reading the *Doctor Who* Wiki to retell the story, viewers certainly use wikis to fill in gaps from missed episodes and unknown transmedia extensions, or clarify narrative ambiguities and uncertainties. Such a wiki does more than just document a fiction, effectively serving as a transformed site of storytelling itself.

If many wikis focused on fictional culture retell their object's stories, videogame wikis take this impulse further by offering collectively-authored walkthroughs, strategies, and guides to popular games. Such game-based wikis go beyond the documentary impulse, as the wikis become sites for conversation and collaborative strategizing for players, creating dual levels of participatory culture within both the game and the wiki. Game wikis for online games like *Word of Warcraft*or *Everquest* are particularly active as they mirror their online storyworlds with comprehensive analysis and discussion of how the games work. Many wikis, regardless of topic, extend the ludic spirit of games to the creation of the wikis themselves, as wiki systems and communities can offer “ achievements” and rewards for active editors who contribute to the wiki. Such wikis map the gaming impulse of one aspect of participatory culture onto the collaborative documentation of wikis, suggesting important overlaps between cultural phenomena.

One step further away from the documentary norm is the practice of **wiki analysis**. Although Wikipedia polices the boundary to exclude “ original research,” fan wikis often welcome research, analysis and speculation, especially of ongoing cultural objects. *Lostpedia* was particularly active in this realm, providing analysis and theories for the mysteries of *Lost* as the show progressed over its run in the late-2000s. Some wikis span a broader array of cultural phenomena as an analytic object, such as the highly popular TV Tropes wiki. Starting in 2004 as a whimsical list of common conventions and clichés in fictional television, it has grown into a vast example of collaborative narratology, compiling thousands of storytelling

examples and trends from a range of media. By embracing original analysis and allowing pages to grow regardless of notability or external documentation, TV Tropes provides an alternative model from Wikipedia as to how wikis can harness collective intelligence to achieve impressive results.

Although the most common and widespread uses of wikis are to create documentation and analysis, they have also been used as a tool for **collaborative creativity** of so-called "fanon," or non-canonical extensions to the original storyworld. Fan wikis certainly can embed original creative works, such as fan fiction and remix videos, that are available through other online platforms – wikis dedicated to a particular franchise often link to relevant fanon, or some wikis document the larger world of fan creativity across a range of fannish objects, such as the vast Fan Fiction Wiki. Another type of creative wiki uses the platform to collaboratively author fanon directly, creating an alternative universe of fanon to compliment the canonical source material. Often the dedicated fanon wikis for a popular franchise, like *Star Trek* and many videogames, can become as large in scope and active participation as their parallel canonical wikis. Fans often use fanon wikis as a place to create role-playing fictions, authoring narratives by each fan acting their part as a character within the storyworld while embracing the ludic possibility of wikis to extend the original object of their fandom.

One subset of creative wikis are particularly noteworthy, as fans embrace the wiki platform to collectively produce parody. The Uncyclopedia is a parody of Wikipedia, mocking the documentary impulse by creating a humorous encyclopedia of lies and disinformation. Another Wikipedia parody derives more directly from fandom: Wikiality: The Truthiness Encyclopedia professes to be an encyclopedia of the world as seen through the onscreen persona of Stephen Colbert from the television show *The Colbert Report*, a parody of right-wing pundits. In a 2006 episode of his show, Colbert satirically praised Wikipedia's open approach to information, coining the term "wikiality" as "a reality where, if enough people agree with a notion, it becomes the truth," and encouraged his viewers to edit Wikipedia to make it conform with his (fictional) vision of the world. After Wikipedians blocked the Colbert-inpsired vandalism, fans created Wikiality.com as a site to extend Colbert's satire and create a fictional extension of the character's worldview. The effect is a work of crowd-sourced comedy, a fan-created meta-parody extending the world view of a character who himself is a satirical creation.

Whether aimed at documenting a movie franchise, extending the fictional world of a video game, or creating a parodic vision of reality as inspired by a television character, wikis have demonstrated the possibilities of collective participation to create active hubs for fan culture. The participatory possibilities exemplified by wikis are not unique to the software platform; as new technologies develop, these examples and systems will certainly be supplanted with new facets of fan culture. However, core principles like collectivity, freedom, transparency, and emergence will certainly endure in some fashion, no matter what technologies emerge to augment and supplant wikis within the realm of participatory culture.

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