Second sight

Power struggle

How do you keep track of the bubbling mass of information that is Wikipedia? This chaotic-looking mosaic is one attempt to show which topics are contained in the online encyclopedia, and those most hotly contested.

It's a mind-boggling task. About 4 million "Wikipedians" have made over 130 million edits, and the English-language version alone contains 1.7 million articles. Every second a new edit is made, and every day 2000 new articles spring up.

To make sense of it all, Bruce Herr and Todd Holloway of Indiana University, Bloomington, created clusters of 300 or so articles that touch on a related topic, such as a religion or a famous person. For each cluster they took one picture from the most popular article and laid them out in a circular grid.

Atop the grid are coloured dots showing how often and how recently each article has been edited. The larger, darker dots mean more intense activity. The list of blitzed articles reveals the idiosyncratic priorities of Wikipedians: Jesus, Adolf Hitler, Nintendo, Hurricane Katrina, Britney Spears and Albert Einstein.

Updating the image in real time would allow Wikipedia's administrators to spot where arguments are taking place, Herr suggests. If rival contributors are repeatedly changing each other's entries, for example, a page could be locked until the mood cools (locked pages at the time of writing include entries on Sheffield Wednesday football club, Mikhail Gorbachev and pigs).

The mosaic has been commended in a competition for images that visualise network dynamics, coinciding with this week's International Workshop and Conference on Network Science in Bloomington.