

What Is Wiki?

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Abstract

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1. Introduction

Wiki is in Ward's original description: The simplest online database that could possibly work.

Wiki is a piece of server software that allows users to freely create and edit Web page content using any Web browser. Wiki supports hyperlinks and has a simple text syntax for creating new pages and crosslinks between internal pages on the fly.

Wiki is unusual among group communication mechanisms in that it allows the organization of contributions to be edited in addition to the content itself.

Like many simple concepts, "open editing" has some profound and subtle effects on Wiki usage. Allowing everyday users to create and edit any page in a Web site is exciting in that it encourages democratic use of the Web and promotes content composition by nontechnical users.

2. How Wikis Works

Chances are that you have heard of Wikis by now – they seem to be popping up everywhere. For example, The most famous wiki is called Wikipedia, a massive online encyclopedia. Wikipedia has become so large (more than a million articles) that you run across it all the time in Google. It is so popular that it is now one of the Top 100 web sites in the world!

Wikis are growing because, at their core, they are about as simple as can be. That simplicity means that people find them easy to use, just like e-mail and blogs. Like e-mail and blogs, wikis also perform a very useful service in a simple way. A wiki allows a group of people to enter and communally edit bits of text. These bits of text can be viewed and edited by anyone who visits the wiki.

That's it. What it means is that, when you come to a wiki, you are able to read what the wiki's community has written. By clicking an "edit" button on an article, you are able to edit the article's text. You can add or change anything you like in the article you are reading.

This simplicity and the utter openness of a wiki cause many people to instantly reject the idea. Wikis also seem very strange to many people. Where does all the information come from? Is it reliable? What stops people from vandalizing a wiki until it dies? People assume that because anyone can edit a wiki at any time, the wiki must be flawed. But wiki supporters claim this is an incorrect assumption. Let's look at a real wiki to understand what is actually going on.

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3. Understanding Wikipedia

Because Wikipedia is the largest and most popular wiki on the planet, we will use it as an example to understand how wikis work in practice. If you go to Wikipedia.org and look at the home page, you'll see a welcome screen that shows you how to access different versions of Wikipedia, along with a search box.

Type "wing warping" into the search box, and you will arrive at a typical Wikipedia article. The "Wing warping" page offers a brief description of wing warping, links to several related articles inside Wikipedia and several external links.

This is normal for any wiki – a wiki is nothing but a collection of Web pages interconnected with each other through internal links. In Wikipedia, there are more than a million pages like this in the English version.

If you read the article, you will find that it is a useful source of information. It simply tells you what wing warping is and directs you to other resources. Despite the fact that anyone can edit the page (even you), there is no pornography, profanity or Nazi slogans on the page. All the material is completely on-topic.

Now we can ask the key question when it comes to Wikis – where did this page on wing warping come from? Who wrote it? With any "normal" encyclopedia, the answer to that question is simple – the encyclopedia paid someone to write the article. With Wikipedia, the answer to that question is completely different.

3.1. The Creation of Wikipedia Pages

At the top of the "Wing warping" page in Wikipedia, you see a tab that says, "Edit this page." That is a wide-open invitation to anyone – any visitor to Wikipedia (including you) can edit any page. If you have something to say about wing warping that you feel should be on the page, or if you have an external link that you believe would be helpful to other readers who are reading about wing warping, or if you're compelled to write something completely unrelated, then you can add whatever you have to say to the page. Simply click on the "Edit this page" tab and type away.

4. Wiki Communities

The heart of any wiki is its community. Literally millions of people visit Wikipedia every month, and together they form Wikipedia's community. Each person who arrives is able to play one or more roles on the site. For example:

The large majority of people who visit Wikipedia are readers. They arrive at Wikipedia for whatever reason and read one or more articles. Some people who visit Wikipedia become writers. They add a new section to an existing article or create a brand new article. Many people act as editors. If they see an error on a page they are reading, they correct it. If they can make a small addition that is helpful, they will do it on the spot. Several hundred visitors who have been contributing to Wikipedia for a period of time are granted administrator privileges. These privileges give them the right to do things like deleting and un-deleting pages, blocking and unblocking IP addresses, etc. Writers, editors and admins work together to solve almost all of the problems that you would expect to arise in an open platform like Wikipedia. They also work collaboratively create some really well-written and in-depth articles.

The best way to understand how the community works is to add something to Wikipedia and see what happens.

5. Vandalism and Edit Wars

It is easy for a person to vandalize Wikipedia. Since anyone can edit any page, the possibility is always there. The vandal might add profanity or inappropriate images to a page, might erase all the content of a page, etc. As you can see in the previous section, however, there are tools that make it easy for the community to find and remove vandalism. There are also other tools available on Wikipedia to help corral users who are persistently destructive. For example:

It is easy for anyone who sees vandalism to revert pages back to a pre-vandalism state. It is easy for any user to alert the rest of the Wikipedia community to vandalism that is in progress. It is possible for an admin to block or ban users (or IP addresses) who are persistently destructive. It

is possible for an admin to protect a page temporarily to keep people from changing it. It is possible for an admin to delete an inappropriate page. Tools like these make it easy for members of the community to quickly eliminate vandalism and prevent vandals from coming back.

A more subtle, less intentional form of vandalism, called an "edit war," can also occur on a wiki. In an edit war, two or more people edit or revert pages over and over again in order to express their point of view. We'll examine this wiki hallmark in the next section.

Edit wars can happen on any wiki, but on a large wiki like Wikipedia, they can reach epic proportions. The best way to understand an edit war is to look at a battleground page and use it as an example – Wikipedia's page about George W. Bush, for example.

It is easy to understand why the George W. Bush page might be a battleground. There are many, many people who love George W. Bush, and there are many, many people who despise him. Those who love him naturally want to emphasize things about George Bush that match their view of the man. In the same way, so do those who despise him. Thus, you can get dozens of people editing and re-editing the article to express their point of view.

The interesting thing about an edit war like this is that, with a controversial topic, it is completely natural and to be expected. Both sides have their unique point of view, and those views are incompatible. However, the outcome of the conflict is interesting, and you can see it if you read the George W. Bush page.

6. Conclusion

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Acknowledgment

The authors would like to thank... more thanks here

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