

What You're Reading

A Hitchhiker's Guide to Wikis

A wiki is a conversation happening now, not a prewritten monologue. Like a garden, a wiki is best comprehended via its process of growth, and that growth always has some rough edges.

This wiki probably looks rather strange compared to, say, our public website, our official documents, or our newsletters. That's because those are *finished* things, checked, proofed, and settled before most people see them. A wiki is a radically different sort of thing, and it's worth a minute to explain how and why that's so, because that difference is part of the whole point.

This wiki is not a published book; it's instead a common notebook that everyone can write in. A wiki is most like a community garden: permanently unfinished, always a little messy, always slightly wild. It changes season over season. Sometimes people decide to change what's there, occasionally someone has to come through and trim out the weeds, or replant what's not doing so well. Many of the plants thrive, and when they do, they help to make our shared home a more lovely environment. Only, rather than turning sunlight, water, and soil into a place of rest and beauty, a wiki turns community attention and shared values into an environment of knowledge, that's readily available to everyone and serves the community's thriving.

This might help to explain a few things that could otherwise put you off:

Stubs

You'll come across pages and occasionally entire books that are barely a sentence. You'll find headings with no contents. This is not neglect, this is a *stub*. A stub is a placeholder that says "this topic belongs here, and hopefully someone will fill in the details." A good, empty stub is doing useful work; it helps to clarify the shape of what isn't yet written down, but should be. Again, a great wiki is never finished; it's always growing and adapting. That felt tension, where you see a stub and you *wish* it was filled in? That's awesome; if you know what should go there, let yourself be moved by that tension and fill it in; that's part of how the wiki grows.

Casual Tone

Much of this is written how people talk, not the way we'd word a proposal or official policy. Sometimes things are unclear. This is a deliberate tradeoff! A wiki works best when writing something down is fast and low-stakes. If every contribution has to be polished enough to publish between hard covers, then almost nobody contributes, and their knowledge stays locked inside

their heads -- and then, eventually lost. If something feels too loose for what it's describing, if it bothers you and you think you could say it better, then you can fix it. You can fix it right now!

But ... Chaos?

I keep saying *you can fix things*. In particular, any resident of Nyland is allowed to edit almost any of these pages at any time. You might think this leads to immediate chaos, but it's not as bad as you might expect, because each old version of a page is saved, too, and someone else can just come along and fix up a page by reverting it more quickly than someone who means well can do damage.

Dealing with deliberate vandals can be a problem on higher-visibility, totally public wikis like Wikipedia, but even then it's not that hard. You just take vandals' editing permissions away, and then revert their changes. As a community wiki, I don't expect this to ever be a real issue.

The Big Idea to Take Away

This wiki is *for* and *by* Nyland residents. It's only as good as the community makes it, and "the community" includes *you*. You don't need to learn anything technical to help. If you know something a page gets wrong or leaves thin, the value you'd add by saying so (even to someone else who types it in!) is *exactly* the sort of communal memory this wiki is meant to cultivate.

Those who founded this community, or who have been here for a while, already understand why that communal memory matters, and how easily it evaporates. This wiki is just a place to keep it: that we control, that will still be here in twenty and thirty and fifty years, and that doesn't belong to anyone but *us*.

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