

10 Wikipedia as a Role-Playing Game, or Why Some Academics Do Not Like Wikipedia

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The best way to understand the sometimes uneasy relationship between Wikipedia and academics is to conceive of it as a game.

There are many ways to start editing Wikipedia, and not all of them involve making a fool of oneself, but that's the path I took. I was running a popular free online dictionary used by about two hundred thousand Polish users monthly. Polish Wikipedia had an article on the dictionary—which I may have contributed to, a little bit. When I noticed that the article was nominated for deletion, I was puzzled: Wikipedia was a community-driven encyclopedia that anyone could edit, and its storage space was not running out any time soon, right? Right?

I checked the page with a discussion about deleting the article and eagerly joined in, certain that I could persuade the disputants of the article's value. I soon found out that even though I was allowed to discuss it, I could not vote due to my nonexistent edit count. So I decided to start editing so as to defend the page I created, and after a lot of effort, I reached the insanely high (as it seemed then) edit count of one hundred edits, allowing me to participate in deletion discussions.

I was not hiding the fact that I created the website that I was defending, and I was confused that the Wikipedians were politely insisting that I had a conflict of interest (or "COI," as discussed in chapter 5) while at the same time claiming that all arguments must fall or stand on their own merit. Their inconsistency was striking, too: their motion to remove an article about a free dictionary website was moot as there were other similar projects with their own articles on Wikipedia, and I immediately and triumphantly pointed this out. It only had the perverse effect of having those

projects then be candidates for deletion, though. Plead as I might, I was not able to save the article from being deleted. A well-written encyclopedic entry about my precious website went into oblivion!

Even after this disappointment, I felt there was a certain logic to my opponents' arguments. Since other online dictionaries lost their coverage, too, at least it was fair. More importantly, I noticed that what I had thought was an entirely spontaneous and disorganized conversation was, in fact, a community of many rules and norms.

It took me a while to realize that I must have initially appeared as a shameless self-promoter. Still, I continued editing out of curiosity and for the fun of it. Within a year I became elected as an administrator on Polish Wikipedia. One more year—a bureaucrat. A little later, a global steward, an ombudsman, a Funds Dissemination Committee member, and eventually a trustee of the Wikimedia Foundation. Somewhere along the way, I realized that I was spending way too much time on Wikipedia and that it was affecting my academic work. Instead of cutting down on my activity, I decided I should make it a primary topic of my research.

In this essay, I am going to show why academics are so reluctant to engage in Wikipedia and explain why editing Wikipedia is a role-playing game. Hear me out.

Wikipedia and Academia

When I was beginning my project, there were no solid academic books that I could find about Wikipedia. Later, quite a few were published that I am fully confident are excellent and to the point,¹ but at the time Wikipedia was still gaining the initial interest of the social researchers doing qualitative studies of organizations.

As I just submitted my associate professorship application and was undergoing a tenure review equivalent, I had to strategize on what topic I should take next so that I could build a solid case for my future full professorship. Many faculty members whom I consulted believed that focusing on Wikipedia was a dead end. They pointed out that, even though the topic had not been fully covered, it was also due to the fact that senior professors perceived online communities as a not entirely serious topic and possibly being a temporary fad. More importantly, as I was more and more open and vocal about my support for Wikipedia, I also faced harsh criticism and

hostility. On a number of occasions I was sneered or ridiculed at during conference presentations and repeatedly requested to admit that Wikipedia should not be treated seriously.

One of the lessons learned for me was that, apparently, Wikipedia was perceived as something very, very bad in academia, at least in the social sciences. Even though the perception of Wikipedia among scholars has been changing over time² and Wikipedia is more and more welcome in classrooms, the wide divide between these two worlds is still very apparent and may be worth reflecting on a little bit.³

Everybody in academia uses Wikipedia. And when I mean “everybody,” I mean, well, everyone who has a computer, has internet access, and occasionally has questions outside their expertise that may have answers in the body of human knowledge. Numerous studies have shown that the accuracy of Wikipedia is on par with the “professional” encyclopedias,⁴ with minor biases going one way or another.⁵ It is also much better referenced by design as one of the ground rules is to only add information with valid sources that a reader may verify for themselves—although this rule is not usually enforced.

I asked myself a question then, and it has puzzled me ever since: why are not all academics actively contributing to Wikipedia and using it for their regular classwork? After all, writing Wikipedia articles is a perfect student homework. A standard essay is typically going to land in a shredder immediately after grading, and virtually no one is going to read it ever again. A Wikipedia article, on the other hand, even if initially quite poorly developed, is likely to be useful for many readers who may also gradually improve it and help it grow. It gives a solid chance to give back to the society as well as support the underprivileged for whom Wikipedia is the main source of knowledge.

Also, writing an encyclopedic article is, arguably, a paragon of an academic effort. It requires the collection of valid, reliable scholarly references; the ability to synthesize them and refer to them accurately; and the ability to write in a neutral language. The outcome serves the general public, and the students know that their output will be widely read, which for many raises the bar and increases their motivation significantly.

There are other benefits, too. Wikipedia submissions are frequently verified for plagiarism by volunteers. Wikipedia editors restlessly point out missing references and correct poorly written phrases, and the wiki engine

allows detailed tracking of contributions. As a result, a student assignment can not only be writing an article from scratch but also be improving and expanding an existing article.

Given all that, I have wondered why on earth are professors all around the planet so reluctant (as also discussed by Robert Cummings in chapter 9) to include Wikipedia assignments into university course work? After over a decade of spending time among Wikipedians and among my academic peers, I think I have some clues.

First of all, editing Wikipedia seems difficult. There is a large number of rules for editing and formatting that one has to follow, and any professor who would include Wikipedia writing into their curriculum would have to master these as well, even if only to be able to answer simple questions or, at the very least, not answer them with sufficient confidence.

Second, Wikipedia is perceived as inaccurate. It does not matter that its reliability on average is high, according to most studies published; that it is perceived as a normal, neutral source of information by the regular media; or that the majority of medical students find it useful and use it to learn with good results.⁶ The perception is shaped much more by spectacular blunders and hoaxes,⁷ which are admittedly much more likely to appear on Wikipedia than in a published book encyclopedia. The fact that the latter is getting obsolete day by day or that hoaxes are regularly weeded out by the Wikipedia community and do not stay long in popular articles does not affect this perception much here.

Third, there is a wider change in the society linked to a major crisis of trust in science, leading to defensive and dismissing reactions of academia. Different sides of this phenomenon manifest through, for example, “alterscience” communities such as climate change deniers, anti-vaxxers, homeopaths, or even more exotic flat Earthers and a generalized anti-intellectualism. There are surely many complex reasons for this change happening, including the spread of fake news and network propaganda, but one of the clear side effects is a rapidly declining authority of science in the general public. Doctor Google has become the practitioner of choice and the first source of information for a majority of patients.⁸ Nonexperts have less and less respect for formal academic authority, and there is a strong rise of citizen science—a global movement of amateurs gathering and interpreting data as well as making actual and valid scientific discoveries. Wikipedia fits perfectly into this trend since it aims at democratizing

academic knowledge. The fact that Wikipedia reveres science and strictly follows the rules of the scholarly reporting of findings does not change the fact that Wikipedians are perceived as circumventing the traditional knowledge distribution channels. Thus, many scholars may recognize the growing distrust in science and its disastrous consequences as somewhat related to anti-credentialism that is so typical on Wikipedia.

Finally, Wikipedia governance is bizarre, messy, and a-hierarchical.⁹ For professors, arguably one of the most traditionally structured professions, it must appear as a nightmare.

However, there clearly is also a very real (and not just misconceived) power struggle there. Wikipedia indeed occupies the niche previously reserved only for those high in the academic hierarchy. Still, if Wikipedia is so widely popular and effective in knowledge dissemination, should not scholars eagerly develop it? When I was trying to understand the apparent paradox, I realized that perceiving Wikimedia as a game is, in fact, a useful metaphor explaining it.

Wikipedia as a Role-Playing Game

Wikipedia is a role-playing game (RPG). It is a widely popular massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG). It is a massive, collaborative action research experiment (as demonstrated in chapter 11) in creating a knowledge-building social movement¹⁰ torn among the good-faith collaboration and pro-social behaviors and the inevitable political struggles, tensions, and reflections of social biases.¹¹ Wikipedia RPG participants play the roles of encyclopedia writers. Irrespective of their age or occupation, they are deadly serious about staying in character. They created a plethora of rules about putting their ego on the side, behaving in a civil manner, and so on. The number of behavioral policies and guidelines on Wikipedia is much higher than in most “professional” organizations—there are forty-five thousand words just about proper conduct the last time I checked, and there are over one thousand other regulatory documents about other aspects of Wikipedia editing, with a word count reaching millions in total. It is not a coincidence that geek folklore is definitely well rooted in Wikipedic culture.

Seeing Wikipedia as an RPG solves several puzzles at once. For instance, it helps explain why real-life credentials are frowned on there. After all, it

is not particularly fair to get an advantage for your Dungeons & Dragons character by insisting that you actually know how sword combat works. It also explains why many Wikipedians are well educated or enrolled in doctoral programs but why not so many actually employed in academia: playing a scientist is so much more fun when you are not one for a living.

The perception of Wikipedia as an RPG explains also the reluctance of the ivory tower inhabitants to participate. When you are a soldier, you do not necessarily spend your free time playing paintball with friends. As a result, editing Wikipedia is perceived as a play for those who are academic would-bes. Granted, Wikipedia is read much more widely than any academic textbook and has a much bigger audience than any professor may dream of, but participating might indicate that one is not an actual academic.

Since academia in all its forms worldwide is also a highly ritualized theater with its own scripts, the fact that Wikipedia has concrete real results in knowledge dissemination is irrelevant. Allowing Wikipedia articles as important contributions that could be used in tenure reviews would be like introducing Star Wars X-wings into a Dungeons & Dragons battle—highly effective but somewhat incompatible.

Even though Wikipedia can be seen as an RPG, its outcomes are very real. As a result, we can also observe quite palpable shifts in knowledge-power distribution threatening the privileged caste of academics, which unsurprisingly definitely adds to the sentiment against Wikipedia. A serious game that results in creating the most popular reliable knowledge source in the world and disrupts existing knowledge hierarchies and authority, all in the time of massive anti-academic attacks—what is there not to hate?

Notes

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