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Wikipedia: An Emergent Encyclopedia

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Wikipedia: An Emergent Encyclopedia

Though one has every reason to be skeptical of anything that is free, Wikipedia is the best thing to hit the Net since Google. To call this collaborative project an encyclopedia doesn't really do Wikipedia justice. It is actually a *complex* and *emergent* system. An *emergent* system is one in which the behavior of individuals within the system is guided by a given set of rules, though no overall coordinator exists anywhere within the hierarchy. It is like an army that runs smoothly on its own with no commander. Cells, ant colonies, and the stock market are all examples of emergent systems. The requirement of a *complex* system is that it be open, allowing energy and information to flow both in and out. There is never equilibrium and there is never a final perfect product. Behavior of the entire system is adaptive and evolves toward fitness. Indeed there is probably very little I can tell you about Wikipedia today that will not have changed by the time these words are published. That is how dynamic or *wiki* Wikipedia really is.

Though invisible, there is a core group of just over 1000 volunteers that write and edit most of the articles, though anyone can contribute provided they follow the guidelines. There is no formal peer review other than the edits of readers. Vandalism is nearly non-existent since it is quickly edited away, while the most accurate and informative writing rises to the top. Complexity theory would call this a *feedback loop*. Wikipedia, much like the Internet itself, has taken on a life of its own, such that its own founder, Jimmy Wales, admits that when he recently went to edit the front page, the format had changed enough that he backed off.

Editing Wikipedia however is actually rather straightforward, and if you disagree, there is a tutorial to get you started. With the click of a button, the contributor can create text, insert a hyperlink, a mathematical formula, or an image. Gun-shy authors can practice their skills in the *sandbox*. Wikipedia discourages the insertion of copyrighted material without permission and gives the caveat that authors must be prepared to have their writing edited. Wikipedia supports the *Copyleft* movement, and if you aren't sure what that is, I suggest looking it up, you-know-where. Authors have the option to register their identity such that readers can check their profiles, pictures, and provide feedback via email. Registering through the Wikipedia portal creates a friendly online community, adding a level of author accountability that promotes quality work. For more information on the collaborative software that drives Wikipedia see the book [The Wiki Way: Collaboration and Sharing on the Internet](#), by Ward Cunningham.

Indeed Wales has never actually met any *Wikipedian* (referring to the volunteer editors and writers), though he hopes to meet a few as he tours various conferences in Europe this summer. Wales originally funded Wikipedia out of pocket, but it is now run from donations made to the non-profit foundation. The .org domain is a result of a decision to not sell advertisements.

Here is how the encyclopedia portion of Wikipedia might look: I checked the entry for *proline*. Broadly, the entry states that proline is one of the twenty amino acids used as a building block for protein in cells. The molecular structure is diagramed, as is an explanation of how proline is involved in protein folding. A hyperlink to the phrase *amino acids* segues to an article discussing the chemical properties, structures, and reactions. Since amino acids associated with building proteins are *proteinogenic* there is another link to this term as well, only this article is much briefer. This is called a *stub* article. Stub articles are the “ugly ducklings” in the Wikipedia pond. A stub is essentially a seed that other editors may build upon. So though critics may see stubs as woefully lacking in content it is, much like an amino acid, a building block.

My grandfather purchased the Encyclopedia Britannica from a traveling salesman for his son. These heavy volumes collect dust and fall progressively out of date. His son continued the tradition of purchasing an encyclopedia, but volume by volume from a grocery store that discounted knowledge as an incentive to buy food items. Ironically though, Wikipedia WAS at some point the Encyclopedia Britannica. When Wikipedia was originally created some volunteers loaded a public domain version of the 1911 Britannica, but most of these entries have since been edited beyond recognition.

Wikipedia is not your grandfather's encyclopedia, nor is it your father's encyclopedia. It is the people's encyclopedia.