Wikipedia definitions of the artist's book: a neutral point of view?

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Presented at:
Traditional and emerging formats of artists' books: Where do we go from here?
A two-day conference at the School of Creative Arts, University of the West of England, Bristol, UK
Thursday 9th and Friday 10th July 2009

Abstract
Following on from her Blue Notebook article about the artist's book page on Wikipedia (*Who cares where the apostrophe goes?*), her 2008 lecture *Wikipedia - the Oceanic Page*, and also Francis Elliott's discussion of Wikipedia at a UWE conference last year, Emily Artinian takes a closer look at how the artist's book pages on this collaborative encyclopedia have evolved. There will be specific consideration of the site's Neutral Point of View (NPOV) rule, the widespread phenomenon of wiki-vandalism, and the ways in which some instances of this may constitute artists book activity. The talk will include a live intervention with audience participation. Bring your digital spray paint.

CONTENTS

Introduction

This session, on artist's books and Wikipedia, follows up on an article I wrote for *The Blue Notebook*, and also from a talk I gave last year, *Wikipedia: The Oceanic Page*, and also from a talk on the same subject given here last year by Francis Elliot, who has made a significant contribution to the artist's book page and many other definitions on Wikipedia.

I'm not sure if anyone here is still going to be surprised by the fact that Wikipedia is editable, by anyone. In the few years I've been desultorily contributing to it, I still come across great surprise at this. I've heard there was surprise here in the audience last year at Francis' talk, at the fact that anyone could contribute to an entry, delete entries, create new entries. I found the same thing at my talk at the Tate last year, and also every year in my lecture to the foundation students I teach – a pretty web 3.0-savvy set, who nonetheless gasp when I make a vandalistic edit, for their edification. So, let's just get this out of the way first off:

[Make minor edit to second sentence on artist's book entry: '…they are **usually** published in small editions' >> '…they are **often** published in small editions']

Fig 1 – Current Artist's book definition, 9 July 2009
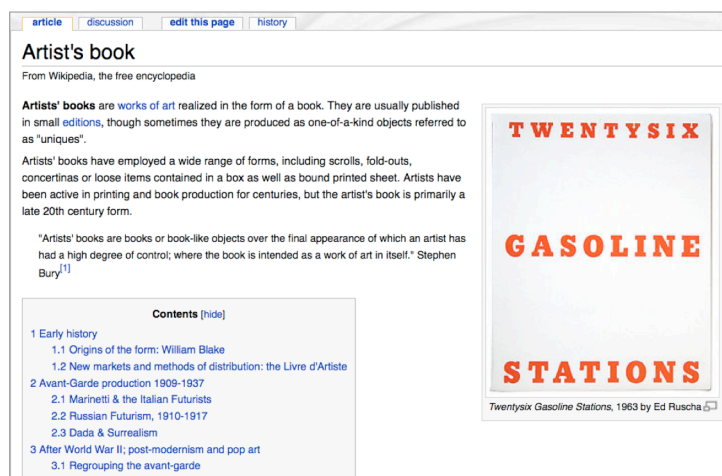
Today I'm going to retrace some of the ground covered in the above talks/essay. This is somewhat repetitive; however: (1) there is still limited editorial activity on the artist's book pages on Wikipedia whilst there's ever increasing traffic (fig 2) –3176 views in June this year; and (2) debate about definition of the field of artists books is still going strong (one of the main things we're here to discuss today at this conference).

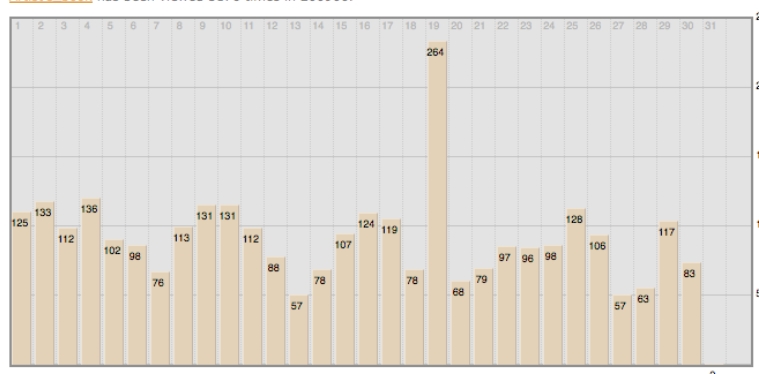Fig 2 – Access Wikipedia page traffic for any definition from that entry's History page.

Tom Sowdon on the 21st Century Book discussion group on Artists Books 3.0 (www.artistbooks.ning.com):

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Wouldn't it be great if a book artist could go anywhere and say what kind of book they made, and everyone they met would understand exactly what they meant? So, perhaps to put it simply, this is what we are trying to do, to make a proposal for an international language; a contextual descriptor for any type of artist's book.[i]

This is just what the Wikipedia definition can help with, or help to interrogate, in any case.
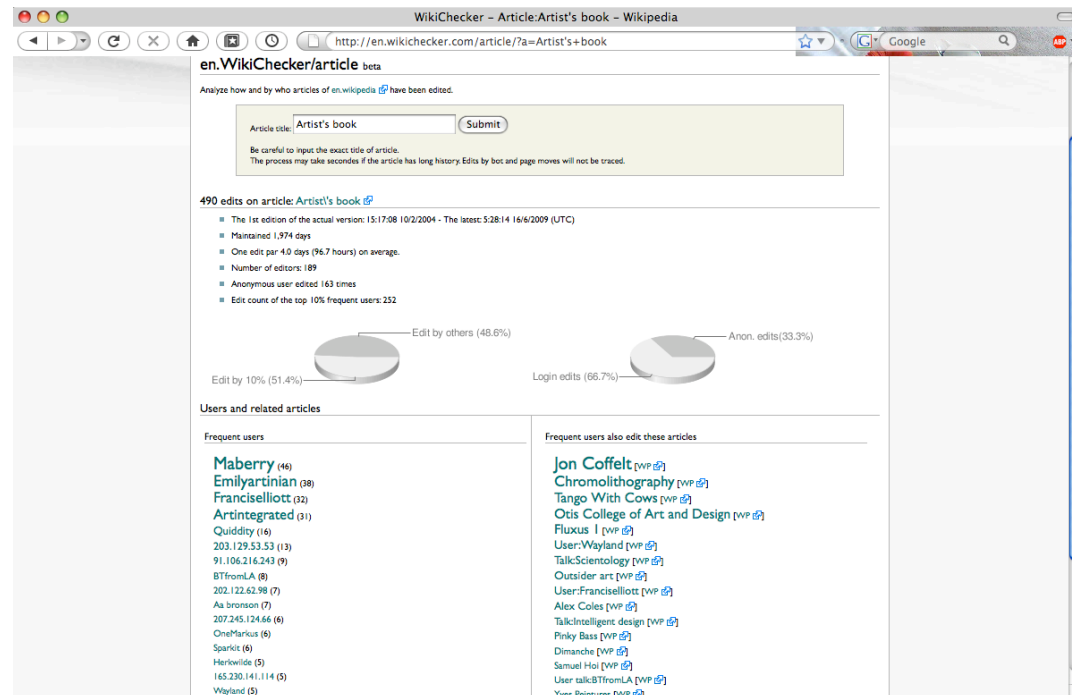
A quick look at who is / has been contributing:

Fig 3 – Access Wikichecker for any definition from that entry's History page.

Points I'll cover today:

1. 'Ignore all rules': a history of Wikipedia generally, including canons, the site's objectivist foundations, and underlying slippage/fissures/cracks in those foundations
2. A look at 3 different iterations of the Artist's book definition (2004/first page, 2006, today): this can be seen as an epicycle echoing Wikipedia's overall history
3. Vandalism and its potentialities as art / artists book activity, and what it can contribute to the understanding of the form(s)
4. We'll conclude with some live editing on Wikipedia, hopefully opening avenues for discussion in the Q&A period, and also, having some fun.

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1. Wikipedia: objectivist intention underlaid by fragmentary realities[ii]

a. **2000: Nupedia, first draft of Wikipedia**
   - Nupedia set up with a complex and hierarchical editing system.
   - Joining Policy: 'We wish editors to be true experts in their fields and (with few exceptions) to possess PhDs' (Lih 2009)
   - Expansion was extremely slow – approved articles numbered in the 100s after a year. For comparison, Britannica 1989 – 400,000 articles

b. **January 2002: Nupedia becomes Wikipedia**
   Much greater openness; anyone can edit, even anonymously
   - New wiki software, invented by Ward Cunningham, opens up this possibility
   - First year – 20,000 articles contributed by 200 volunteers
   - Wikipedia, as of this Monday – 2,926,000 articles

c. **Explosive growth, more trolling and vandals, leading to rules, rules, rules.**
   - Early, exuberant and Californian-y rules of 'Be bold', and 'Ignore all rules', give way to something more reserved:
     NPOV (neutral point of view), V (Verifiability), NOR (No original research)
   - Larry Sanger[iii], one of two founders has left to found Citizendium.org, which is close in ethos to the model of Nupedia – a community of 'experts' (fig 3):
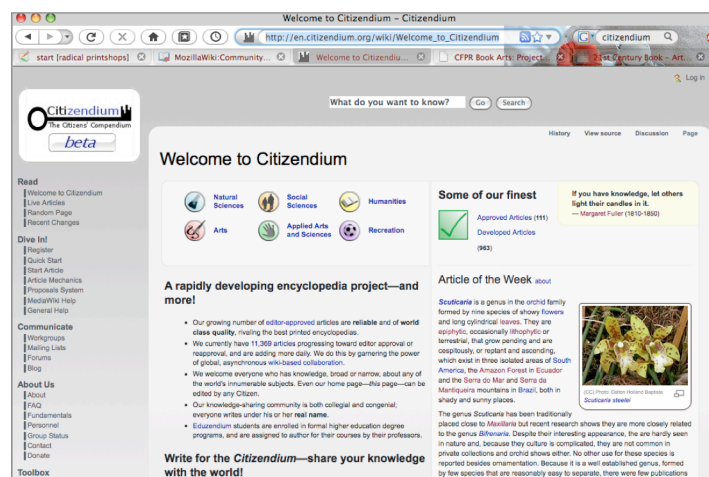

Fig 3. Citizendium, current

d. **truth, Truth, truths**

Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanger, founders of Wikipedia, met on a philosophy discussion board, as enthusiasts of Ayn Rand: the board's main topic = Randian objecivism. This frame informs and underlies Wikipedia's initial mission. Wales, a charismatic and enthusiastic speaker, speaks often on the site generally (see, particularly his talks on TED), with emphasis on a kind of Grand Unification Theory of everything. There is also a constant theme of altruism – of Wikipedia providing access to information around the world, in over 250 languages.

"Imagine a world in which every single person is given free access to the sum of all human knowledge. That's what we're doing." (Wales 2005)

He does have a point – a majority of the languages Wikipedia appears in have never had encyclopedia's at all. He does have a point here. However, a cursory examination of the 'back' pages of Wikipedia evidences a much more fragmented model. All entries have (1) a Talk page, where contributors can debate and

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discuss what a definition should look like; and (2) a History page, which shows hundreds, if not thousands of incremental, often, definitions for most entries. The Talk pages are often much more interesting than the definitions themselves, and reveal points of disagreement, as well as the identities and positions and motivations of contributors. The history pages reveal drastic shifts in many, if not all, definitions that have been around for any length of time, as we'll see in the Artist's Book definition in a minute.

In the positivistic visions of the founders and of many devout Wikipedians, the idea is that this collection of information improves incrementally, in a forward march towards an exhaustive, encyclopaedic knowledge. But on closer inspection of actual activity on the site, with its 'revert wars', wholesale deletion of entries, battles for reinstatement, freezing of popular, high-trafficked entries, and Jimmy Wales taking the position of 'Benevolent Dictator' in order to settle disputes 'fairly' (on what seems like personal whim), we are presented with a picture of a much more multi-vocal, fragmentary and contentious picture. This is interestingly reflected in much of the journalism and writing about the site: descriptions of the processes going on behind the scenes of a definition tend toward a Borgesian tone, often sounding as if the writer is actually Borges, writing *The Library of Babel*:

Andrew Lih, in *The Wikipedia Revolution*:
> *One faction believes Wikipedia should contain pretty much anything, as long as it's factual and verifiable…. On the other side of the debate are the 'deletionists', although this somewhat unfairly characterizes their view in a destructive way. Some prefer the word 'exclusionists'. This camp believes it is important to strictly determine not only whether something is factual, but whether it is notable, whether it is worthy of being included in the pantheon of human knowledge….. At the center of the debate is notability, which is where inclusionists and deletionists have their skirmishes.* (2009, p.116)

and Borges:
> *When it was proclaimed that the Library contained all books, the first impression was one of extravagant happiness. All men felt themselves to be the masters of an intact and secret treasure. There was no personal or world problem whose eloquent solution did not exist in some hexagon. At that time a great deal was said about the Vindications: books of apology and prophecy which vindicated for all time the acts of every man in the universe and retained prodigious arcana for his future. Thousands of the greedy abandoned their sweet native hexagons and rushed up the stairways, urged on by the vain intention of finding their Vindication. These pilgrims disputed in the narrow corridors, proferred dark curses, strangled each other on the divine stairways, flung the deceptive books into the air shafts, met their death cast down in a similar fashion by the inhabitants of remote regions. Others went mad …*

David Runciman in the *London Review of Books*:
> *It turns out that the people who believe in truth and objectivity are at least as numerous as all the crazies, pranksters and time-wasters, and they are often considerably more tenacious, ruthless and monomaniacal. On Wikipedia, it's the good guys who will hunt you down.* (2009)

The Wikipedia pages on rules/policy themselves evidence this slipperyness:

> "in the Wikipedia culture, the notion of "neutrality" is not understood so much as an end result, but as a process" (Reagle 2005)

> Wikipedia reference policy:

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'The threshold for inclusion in Wikipedia is verifiability, not truth – that is, whether readers are able to check that material added to Wikipedia has already been published by a reliable source, not whether we think it is true. Editors should provide a reliable source for quotations and for any material that is challenged or likely to be challenged, or the material may be removed.'

This tension is very much evidenced in the pages on artist's book:

2. The Artist's book page:
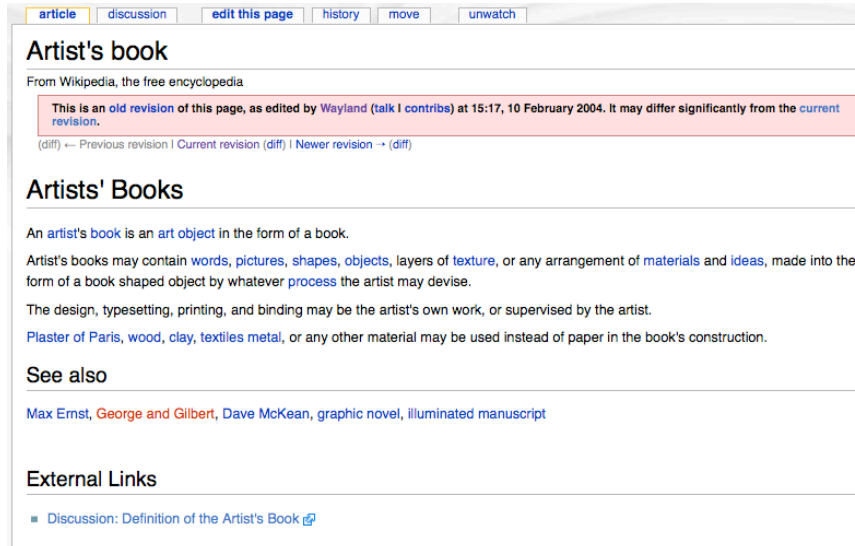### Three iterations that echo the above discussed stages of Wikipedia

a. 2004 - First entry on artist's books. It's by this fellow:

who goes by the username of 'Wayland' on Wikipedia.

and it looked like this, reflecting well the early exuberant character of Wikipedia itself.:

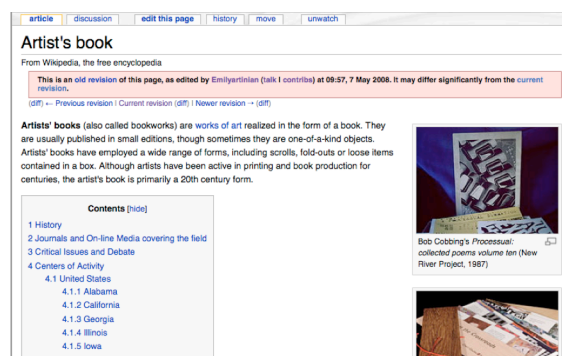b. 2006…2008 – Centers of activity are emphasized (minimal activity between 2004-6)
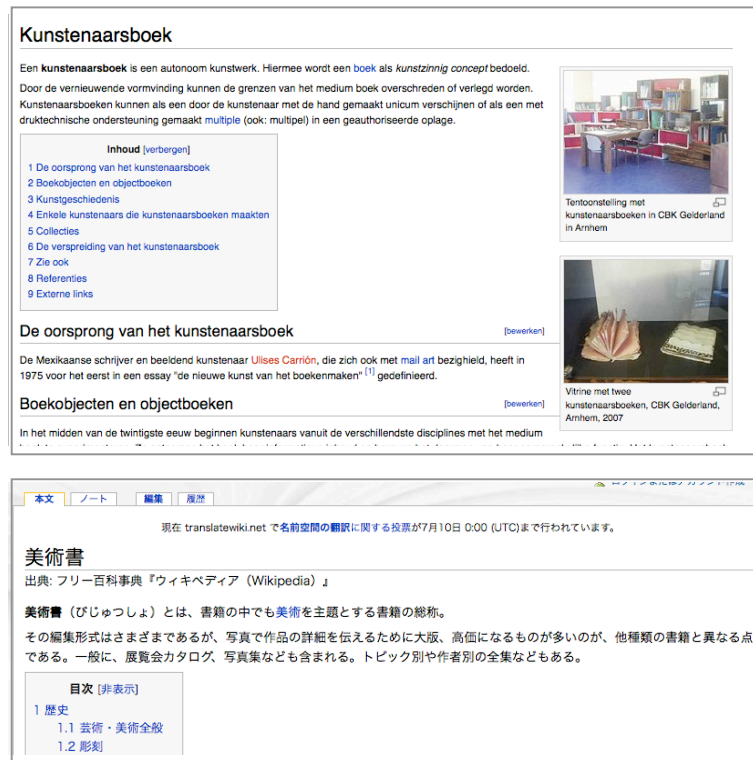

Fig. 6 Artist's book page, 7 May 2008

i. But, little discussion of initiation points – from the livre d'artiste to 60s conceptualism. Further, most of the paragraphs were dropped in with a thud from artists' books organizations' own websites, resulting in an overly promotional character generally.

ii. In 2006, after discussion on the Talk Page (see) with Sue Mayberry, and also a real life discussion with Francis Elliot who'd just gotten interested in contributing to the page, I moved much of the page to a new entry: 'Artists Books: Centers of activity'. This streamlined the entry, in my view, and the edit was supported by two other frequent contributors. However, now perhaps there is too little about this in the current definition?

c. CURRENT DEFINITION (see Fig 1 above)

Since 2006, the Wikipedia page has undergone significant changes: the entry has been brought more into line with a mainstream narrative of 20th century art, particularly with Francis Elliot's edits. Note that the image used at the top of the definition has shifted from works Mayberry added – one of her own books, and also one by Bob Cobbing – to that old favourite, Twentysix Gasoline Stations. Is the definition more accurate? Less so? [point for question answer period]

There are many open tasks, things to add, things to de-emphasise, things to highlight. Just a couple examples:

i. Perhaps the page would benefit from re-inclusion of an overview of areas of activity, a view of the geography of artists book activity globally. Foreign language Wikipedia entries on artists books are fascinating here. {There is a larger Wikipedia project to synthesise definitions in different languages}

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Книга художника

Материал из Википедии — свободной энциклопедии

Это старая версия этой страницы, сохранённая Mikhail Pogarsky (обсуждение | вклад) в 10:06, 26 января 2009. Она может серьёзно отличаться от текущей версии.

(разн.) ← Предыдущая | Текущая версия (разн.) | Следующая → (разн.)

Книга художника – это произведение искусства, в котором автор, прорабатывает не только содержание и иллюстрации, но и все остальные элементы книги.thumb Книга художника может быть уникальной, сделанной автором полностью вручную, или выпускаться ограниченным тиражом, с использованием печатной графики, принтера, цифровой печати и других малотиражных техник. Книга художника – это своеобразный творческий метод, в котором автор использует книжную форму в качестве основополагающего инструмента для самовыражения. Здесь «автор» понимается в широком смысле слова, как творец, мастер особого вида искусства. В отличие от писателя он создаёт книгу, как целостный организм, в котором текст становится лишь одной из составляющих комплексного арт-мессажа. Послание, зашифрованное в Книге художника, почти никогда не ограничивается визуальным и концептуальным рядом, не менее важными оказываются тактильные, слуховые, а иногда и обонятельные, и вкусовые ощущения. Российская Книга художника с одной

ii. And perhaps topics under discussion around this conference/research project on the cannon need to be added:
Sowden: *We think that perhaps "book arts" or "artists' books" have become too small an umbrella; perhaps "artists' publications" would give us a better heading to start classifying and contextualising the field. (Sowden AB 3.0)*

3. Vandalism, or 33 ways to have some fun… and 1 that's missing

The following acts are identified by Wikipedia as vandalism, or vandalism-like activity:

Clear cases of vandalism:
1 Blanking
2 Page creation
3 Page lengthening
4 Spam
5 Vandalbots
6 Silly vandalism
7 Sneaky vandalism
8 Userspace vandalism
9 Image vandalism
10 Template vandalism
11 Abuse of tags
12 Page-move vandalism
13 Link vandalism
14 Avoidant vandalism
15 Modifying users' comments
16 Discussion page vandalism
17 Repeated uploading of copyrighted material
18 Malicious account creation
19 Edit summary vandalism
20 Hidden vandalism
21 Gaming the system

Technically not vandalism, but similar and requiring correction:
22 Tests by experimenting users
23 Using incorrect wiki markup and style
24 NPOV violations
25 Making bold edits
26 Failing to use the edit summary
27 Unintentional misinformation
28 Unintentional nonsense
29 Disruptive editing or stubbornness
30 Harassment or personal attacks
31 Changes to guideline and policy pages
32 Reversion or removal of unencyclopedic material, or of edits covered under Biographies of Living People.
33 Lack of understanding of the purpose of Wikipedia

In my own view, and to conclude, there is a glaring categorical omission in the second list: vandalistic edits made in the spirit of rigorous investigation, metacritical action querying the fixity of the encyclopedia and the epistemology of the encyclopedic impulse. These should be identified. And allowed. And in a minute we'll do one, just to demonstrate the point.

Artists' books very often play this role, sitting as a meta-commentary on the form of the book. The Wikipedia definition of the artist's book is a site ripe for merry pranks, committed as an act of investigation. The page is there, it's editable, and I invite everyone here to use it more - both as a site for exploration of the field and also for a healthy degree of underhandedness.

4. [Audience Performs Edit]

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Joseph M. Reagle (2005) Is the Wikipedia Neutral?
http://reagle.org/joseph/2005/06/neutrality.html#heading9

David Runciman (28 May 2009) Like Boiling a Frog, in *The London Review of Books*
http://www.lrb.co.uk/v31/n10/runc01_.html

Stacey Shiff (31 July 2006) Know It All: Can Wikipedia conquer expertise? in *The New Yorker*
http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/07/31/060731fa_fact

Jimmy Wales (2005) On the birth of Wikipedia *TED* talk (www.ted.com), 20 minutes
http://www.ted.com/talks/jimmy_wales_on_the_birth_of_wikipedia.html

Some Wikipedia watchdogs

www.wikback.com
http://wikipediareview.com/

And the annual Wikipedia conference, this year in Buenos Aires, 26-28 August

http://wikimania2009.wikimedia.org/wiki/Portal

Notes

[i] Artists Books 3.0, 21st Century Book discussion group: http://artistbooks.ning.com/group/21stcenturybook. This discussion group has been continuing the points of debate of this UWE Canon project. Another interesting, related debate took place on Peter Verheyen's Book Arts Web, begun in March 1998: http://www.philobiblon.com/whatisabook.shtml
[ii] For a good general overview of the history of Wikipedia, see Andrew Lih (2009) *The Wikipedia Revolution*
[iii] This fact itself is contentious – Wales claims full credit as sole founder. Sanger claims that he and Wales both had the idea of implementing Ward Cunningham's wiki software independently.

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