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Case Study: Fan History's Proposal For Being Acquired by the Wikimedia Foundation

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Case Study: Fan History's Proposal For Being Acquired by the WMF

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In November 2009, Fan History Wiki approached the Wikimedia Foundation about possibly being acquired by them. The motivations for this on the part of Fan History Wiki were to help the project continue with and grow its mission. The choice to approach the Wikimedia Foundation was based on relationships developed by Fan History's founder at events like RecentChangesCamp and through interaction in #wiki on irc.freenode.net.

Fan History approached people connected to the Foundation, put forth a proposal, posted the proposal to the Foundation mailing list and to Strategy wiki. The process broke down because of some problems. This included lack of an established procedure for the acquisition process, communication problems and expectation issues.

There are several recommendations that Fan History Wiki would make to the Foundation on how to fix this process. The first is to decide if the Foundation is actually interested in new projects or acquiring existing projects. The second is defining the roles of Meta-Wiki and Strategy wiki. The third is to create a list of staff members who would handle acquisition related requests. The fourth is to create a clearly established procedure for how to handle this process.

Background

About Fan History Wiki

Fan History Wiki is a project dedicated to documenting the history of fan communities that was created in May 2006. The wiki covers over 35,000 distinct communities based on source content. ¹

The focus of the wiki has been to approach the task of documenting the history of fan communities by examining micro actions and micro communities. ²After these micro histories are compiled, the wiki seeks to assimilate them into a cohesive picture and create a coherent narrative of the history of fandom on a macro level. This involves a tremendous amount of original research and an allowance for multiple points of view. To get users incentivized to participate, they are made stakeholders by allowing them to document their own histories in a sense that can be, at times, promotional. ³

Fan History Wiki's overarching objectives have been:

- Provide members of fandom a resource to find links to communities in fandom, and explain parts of the culture in those communities to help them adapt to them.
- Provide members of fandom a tool to promote their work, their projects, charity efforts by fans.
- Provide members of fandom a platform to share stories about what happened in fandom so that incidents won't be forgotten.
- Provide a comprehensive directory for fandom that anyone can edit. This is necessary because of increased fragmentation in a web 2.0 world, and as members of fandom transition away from various services because of downtime, problems with policy, etc. It is also necessary because a lot of time in fandom trying to track down authors and artists who disappeared and in trying to locate fanworks that have disappeared.
- Provide academics operating in fandom starting points for additional research and to provide academics with comprehensive data sets.
- Provide companies that deal with fandom a source to locate fandom communities, understand how fandom functions, identify current issues in certain fandoms, give examples of how certain issues were dealt with, etc. By knowing that information, they can better interact with and cater to fandom's specific needs. ⁴

Institutionally, Fan History Wiki's administrative team sees its goals as lending themselves more towards providing a greater good, where money issues can be secondary towards working towards our objectives.

¹ <http://www.aboutus.org/FanHistory.Com> breaks down the totals for number of communities.

² Fan History's philosophy is further documented at <http://www.fanhistory.com/wiki/Fanhistory.com:Philosophy>

³ http://www.fanhistory.com/wiki/Help:Other_promotions and http://www.fanhistory.com/wiki/Help:Fanworks_promotion provide details on how people can self promote on the wiki.

⁴ These objectives are copy and pasted from <http://www.fanhistory.com/wiki/Fanhistory.com:About>

Why Wikimedia Foundation

Fan History Wiki has been trying to seek four things that we have been unable to do internally. They are to insure our financial stability, improve our back end, increase our overall visibility and increase our contributor base of people who can help us document the history of fan communities. We are not necessarily opposed to working with a for profit company if we felt they would back seat some of the more annoying monetization aspects to allow us to continue what we feel is our service for the greater good. To that end, we have discussed possibly being acquired by at least three wiki companies in the past eighteen months. It did not work out and our preference was to find a non-profit partner who could help us in our mission. To this end, we considered the Wikimedia Foundation as one option. We liked the Wikimedia foundation for the following reasons:

- 1) Wikimedia Foundation is a non-profit organization where we fundamentally believe in the objectives of the organization.
- 2) Wikimedia Foundation has credibility that could be extended to our project, helping us accomplish our mission.
- 3) Fan History Wiki's administrative staff feel like we have positive relationships with Wikimedia Foundation staff, based on our interactions at RecentChangesCamp and in various chat rooms like #wiki and #mediawiki on irc.freenode.net.

Approaching Wikimedia Foundation

When making the approach to the Wikimedia Foundation, I first contacted Pete Forysth. Pete was recently hired by the Wikimedia Foundation and advised us to write up a more formal proposal as he did not even know who in the Foundation to approach. We wrote up a proposal and sent it to him for feedback. He still did not know whom to approach and was in the process of moving so he could not really assist us further. We later contacted Cary Bass, who is the Volunteer Coordinator for the Wikimedia Foundation. He suggested we contact Erik Moeller who is the Deputy Director for Wikimedia Foundation and that I CC the proposal to him. This was done. Erik replied back quickly with a reply that applauded the work we are doing with Fan History, suggested that we post the proposal to the foundation mailing list,⁵ and suggested however that we may be better off trying to develop our own long term governance and hosting plan.

⁵ <https://lists.wikimedia.org/mailman/listinfo/foundation-l> is the web home for the mailing list.

We followed Erik's advice and posted our proposal to foundation-l. The reception was mixed. There were some concerns expressed over Fan History's copyright policy⁶ and how we would need to change it if we joined the Wikimedia Foundation. There were issues with our model of allowing both a neutral point of view and multiple points of view. Some people felt that only projects reflecting Wikipedia's Neutral Point of View policy should be allowed by any new projects or any projects that the Foundation would acquire. There were some people who thought the project might be a good fit for the Wikimedia Foundation if we expanded our scope to address additional micro communities. During the discussion, some one mentioned that the next step would be to post our proposal to the Strategy Wiki. This was done. Conversation on the mailing list subsequently stopped and no one really commented regarding the proposal on strategy wiki. In the two weeks after this was done, no further movement was made regarding our proposal.

⁶ <http://www.fanhistory.com/wiki/Fanhistory.com:Copyrights> is a copy of Fan History's copyright policy. It was based off the policy created by Meatball Wiki. We are currently planning to revise it.

Proposal

Summary

Fan History Wiki is a project dedicated to documenting the history of fan communities, and to a lesser extent, documenting the history of online communities, popular culture and the tools that go to support these. The purpose of this document is to provide a general overview of Fan History, and to explain why this project would be a good fit for the Wikimedia Foundation.

Proposal

About Fan History Fan History is a wiki that runs on Mediawiki. It currently gets about 60,000 visitors a month, has over 820,000 articles, and a small but dedicated contributor base. Laura Hale created it in May 2006 as a means of centralizing existing information, and getting more people involved in the process of documenting the history of fandom.

Current objectives for the project include:

- Document the history of fan communities.
- Preserve the history of fandom, especially in areas that are deemed at risk like Geocities.
- Provide academics operating in fandom starting points for additional research and to provide academics with comprehensive data sets.
- Provide members of fandom a resource to find links to communities in fandom, and explain parts of the culture in those communities to help them adapt to them.
- Provide members of fandom a tool to promote their work, their projects, charity efforts by fans.
- Provide members of fandom a platform to share stories about what happened in fandom so that important incidents won't be forgotten.
- Provide a comprehensive directory for fandom that anyone can edit. This is necessary because of increased fragmentation in a web 2.0 world, and as members of fandom transition away from various services because of downtime, problems with policy, etc. It is also necessary because a lot of time in fandom trying to track down authors and artists who disappeared and in trying to locate fanworks that have disappeared.
- Provide companies that deal with fandom a source to locate fandom communities, understand how fandom functions, identify current issues in certain fandoms, give examples of how certain issues were dealt with, etc. By knowing that information, they can better interact with and cater to fandom's specific needs.

Approach to documenting history:

Fan History is about preserving, documenting and writing fandom history. To this end, Fan History:

- Does not have a requirement for article notability.
 - o The belief is that all the little details help to give a complete and more accurate picture of what is going on and what went on in fandom.
 - o The belief is intentionally excluding information can be seen as assigning value statements to fandom. As a history wiki focused primarily on documenting history, we don't feel that is our place to do that. It is the place of others.
 - o The belief is if minor information becomes too tedious, segments can be moved to other pages to tell histories of subfandom in larger fandom communities. Example: Premiere dates are found on many fandom pages. They include international dates for release. If this information becomes too much, it can be moved to another page: Angel movie premiere date for Germany and other German X-Men fandom info can be moved from the X-Men page to a page called Angel fandom in Germany.
 - o The belief is that little examples of activity can later be written into a more prose type article which can contextualize those events, to make them appear less random. Those little details might be emblematic of bigger trends that won't be visible until you have a whole lot of them.
 - o The belief is that little details can be moved off an article, if they aren't important. Information should also be moved, rather than removed. This belief is reinforced in our rules.
- Does not have a have a list of people, fandoms and topics that cannot be mentioned.
 - o The belief is that such a list would make it difficult to accurately present a history of fandom.
 - o The belief is that cross checking such a list would create an unreasonable burden on wiki administrators and other contributors by requiring that they cross check such a list every time an edit was made.
 - o The belief is that would run counter to the wiki spirit.
- Reserves the right to not delete articles about people and events.
 - o The belief is that doing this may involve forms of historical revisionism and that some events need to be told, outweighing the need for requests to delete.
- Is about telling fandom history from the point of view of fans, by using a perspective that defines fandom internally, rather than externally.
 - o The belief is that the method for critiquing ourselves is the most appropriate way to share this history.
 - o The belief is that external methods for critiquing fandom may involve theoretical models that do not work in practice or that may be rejected by large parts of fandom.
 - o The the belief is that fans are the most knowledgeable about their own history and can best put events in fandom into historical context.

Reasons why Fan History Wiki would be a good fit for WMF:

- WMF is trying to be more female friendly in terms of developing its contributor base. Fan History's primary contributor base and audience is female.
 - o A largely female audience is a historical truth for popular culture fandom based around movies, and television. The audience around manga and anime is becoming increasingly female. In most areas, the academics entering the field are female. Major popular culture obsession items at the moment where there is a large female base include Twilight, Harry Potter, Star Trek.
 - o Fan History's inclusion amongst foundation projects can be a selling point for outreach in that area. If needing to point to a similar female dominated group doing similar work, the Organization for Transformative Works can be cited.
- Our scope allows for more esoteric information that could not be included in Wikipedia, Wikiversity or Wikinews that would still help work towards a greater good.
 - o The WMF Foundation supports quality resources that anyone can edit. Fan History is primarily a cultural historical anthropology project dedicated to documenting the history of fandom.
 - o People have tried to do such research on Wikipedia in the past but it frequently gets deleted because of the lack of research, it is original research or it isn't notable. In terms of popular culture studies, Fan History provides a place to do that.
- Fan History being part of the Foundation would allow closer relationships with the science fiction community, the academic community and others with a vested interest in the topic.
 - o We're already being used as an academic source in some places because the research we do on the wiki is not being done by anyone else. With more attention and increased awareness, this can be increased. That attention and use should reflect back on other WMF projects to justify those sources as credible.
 - o Fan History can be used as leverage to develop relationships with programs like the Popular Culture studies work done at USC and MIT.
 - o This would be a big step towards getting professional historians and cultural anthropologists to using Wikipedia related projects more. Some would like such a platform to do their own work and are hesitant to do it on more commercial sites like Wikia.
- Fan History's preservation work would foster good will, improve credibility of WMF projects, generate additional press and help WMF in creating good relationships with other organizations.
 - o We are doing important preservation work related to sites that are closing like Geocities and have identified other sites at risk like Tripod and Angelfire where we need to start working. Most of the work being done preservation wise focuses on just saving the raw content, not screencapping and putting this work into its historical context. There is no competition in that context.
- Our preservation work would help improve credibility, as we become more of a primary source resource. It is easier to cite that work in ways that people cannot cite Wikipedia.
 - o The Internet Archive and other projects received a lot positive press because of their preservation efforts.
 - o Preservation efforts open up opportunities to work with university programs, and other non-profits that have a vested interest in saving that information.

- Fan History's content lends itself to multi-language support and greater unity across languages.
 - o We currently do not have separate multi-languages but we have enough content about other languages that can be stubbed on their own language subdomains that we can start at least 20.
 - o Large community of Russians, Germans, Poles and Spanish speakers who are interested in the topic who currently lack a quality resource.
 - o Language integration across the project would help WMF create a more unified community concept beyond individual language projects.

What Fan History needs from WMF:

- Improved back end support.
- Help increasing our base audience of contributors.
- Financial security.
- The continued ability to work towards our objectives.

What Fan History offers beyond good fit:

- Policies that have been tested to work inside the larger community that meet different standards.
- Scalable policies that have been tested so there should not be huge problems coming on board.
- An all female admin staff at the onset.
- Few copyright problems. While we have some copyrighted images, we could dump almost all and not lose anything substantive.
- A huge scope. We cover over 37,000 fan communities representing television, movies, music, video games, anime, manga, actors, theater, radio, science fiction, cartoons, comics and sports.

Compromises Fan History is happy to make:

- Change our copyright from <http://wmf4.me/81f7e> to the same policy used by WMF.
 - o As Wikia was willing to acquire us and indicated changing ours was not a problem, we are not that concerned.
- Remove images with problematic copyright issues.

Motivation

Fan History's motivation for proposing this is further our own mission.

Key Questions

- Will this help WMF meet its mission?
- Would this be a good thing for Fan History?
- What compromises would need to be made by both sides?
- What sort of autonomy would Fan History be given inside WMF?

Potential Costs

References

- Proposal:Fan History joining the WMF family: Foundation mailing list

Fan History documents

- Why Fan History won't be moving to Wikia any time soon: linked because mentioned on the mailing list
- Multiple perspectives: How we handle NPOV when participants are documenting their own involvement.
- Be a Fan History Reporter: How we cover fandom news
- Rules: How we operate, ban policies, general editing guidelines
- Article deletion: How we decide on article deletion, our notability policy, etc.

Community Discussion

Do you have a thought about this proposal? A suggestion? Discuss this proposal by going to Proposal talk:Fan History joining the WMF family.

Lessons Learned

There was one major lesson learned in making this proposal: The Wikimedia Foundation is not equipped at this point to acquire new projects.⁷ This lesson is based on several challenges that we had in making our proposal:

1. Questions regarding if Wikimedia Foundation would be willing to bring in new content from outside projects.
2. Connectivity problems between proposals on the foundation mailing list, Strategy Wiki and Meta-Wiki.
3. Lack of information for whom to contact inside the Foundation for help.
4. Lack of a clear procedure for this in terms of what the steps should be.
5. Lack of clarity regarding the behavioral expectations of all vested parties in this process.
6. Lack of a timeline for when steps should be taken.
7. No clear point where a proposal is considered dead, beyond silence.
8. Misleading steps in the proposal process, which create misconceptions.
9. Incorrect assumptions regarding Wikipedia needing to apply to all new projects.

⁷ This statement is not necessarily 100% factual. They are likely very equipped to acquire Translate Wiki if they should chose to do so. Translate Wiki's major advantage in being acquired is that they have existing working and funding relationships with the Wikimedia Foundation.

Recommendations

The process for proposing new projects and for possible acquisitions by the Wikimedia Foundation needs to change. I have several general suggestions:

1. Clarification regarding the Foundation's interest in new projects.
2. Clearly defining the roles of Strategy and Meta-Wikis.
3. Creation of a staff list regarding who to contact regarding possible acquisition of projects.
4. Development of a timeline for the acquisition process.

One of the questions brought up by Phoebe Ayers on the Foundation mailing list was if the Foundation was even interested in expanding the scope of their projects.⁸ This is an important question that needs to be answered by the Board of the Foundation with input from the community, where input is solicited from the population beyond that of English Wikipedia. My perception having been through this process is that English Wikipedians tend to define the scope of all potential acquisitions or new projects based on the requirements of English Wikipedia, rather than on the merits of the project and how it would help the overall mission of the Wikimedia Foundation. Fred Bauer expressed the best example of this attitude on the foundation mailing list when he said:

It seems unlikely if only based on "We have no notability requirement."
Essentially, you've forked, chosen an incompatible core policy.⁹

This requirement is not one that Wikinews¹⁰ and Wiktionary¹¹ have. This highlights the need to bring in participants from other projects to help answer the question regarding if the Foundation should be acquiring new projects and under what conditions new projects should be let in.

If, after careful consultation with the community it serves and the board, Wikimedia Foundation decides that it is not interested in creating new content through acquisition or development inside the community, then the proposals on meta and strategy need to be removed. In addition to this, there needs to be a clear statement made on both those wikis and on the Foundation mailing list that the issue of new projects has been permanently tabled and provide a rational for doing so.

The rest of the recommendations are based on the assumption that the Foundation decides that they may be interested in creating new projects or creating new projects.

⁸ <http://lists.wikimedia.org/pipermail/foundation-l/2009-November/056291.html>

⁹ <http://lists.wikimedia.org/pipermail/foundation-l/2009-November/056262.html>

¹⁰ http://en.wikinews.org/wiki/Wikinews:Content_guide and <http://en.wikinews.org/wiki/Wikinews:Newsworthiness> have information on Wikinew's content policy as it applies to notability.

¹¹ http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/Wiktionary:Criteria_for_inclusion is Wiktionary's policy. Their policy starts off with "A term should be included if it's likely that someone would run across it and want to know what it means."

One of the problems that needs to be addressed is the role of the Meta-Wiki and the strategy wiki. As it stands now, this is not clear. When I commented that there were several new content proposals on Strategy wiki that had no activity on them in years, I was quickly corrected by Philippe Beaudette, who said:

- > There are proposals that have been there a
- > year, that have no votes, with no comments on them.

I'm sorry, this is incorrect. Strategy wiki wasn't even set up a year ago.

It was created in July. Proposals weren't accepted until almost August.

I'm willing to have this discussion, but let's do it honestly, and without hyperbole. ;) ¹²

My assumption was that Strategy wiki had moved proposals from Meta to its own wiki because the content and goals were similar. Discussion with several active members at high levels in Foundation projects included references to Meta's Proposals for New Projects¹³ while referencing Strategy Wiki, with no clear differentiation between them each. The descriptions on main pages of each suggests overlapping purpose that creates further confusion. This needs to be fixed, with the possibility of Meta-Wiki being killed or more closely integrated into Strategy wiki to prevent future confusion.

If the Foundation decides that acquiring projects is something that they are interested in, one of the first things that needs to be done is to create a page which identifies people within the Foundation who should be contacted about possible acquisitions. The page should include the role of the person inside the Foundation and which types of projects that the person should be approached about. This process can be similar to that of finding an advisor with similar research interests when applying to a doctoral program. When encountered this problem when we initially approached Pete Forysth; he had no idea who inside the organization would be interested in our project. This is a problem. In addition to making the process easier for parties interested in seeing if the Foundation would be interested in acquiring their projects, it would also help internally in clarifying the roles of people inside the Foundation.

The Wikimedia Foundation needs to establish a clear procedure regarding the acquisition process. This procedure needs to cover such things as who to contact inside the foundation, what information that the Foundation would want to see in any proposal, and where else the proposal should be shared to determine if it is a good fit for both projects. It should also include a timeline of how the process should play out, behavioral expectations for all parties involved and policy for when the Foundation will officially say no to a project. The current process lacks this information. Doing this will address several of the problems that Fan History Wiki encountered.

¹² <http://lists.wikimedia.org/pipermail/foundation-l/2009-November/056267.html>

¹³ That can be found at http://meta.wikimedia.org/wiki/Proposals_for_new_projects where indeed, many of these projects have laid dormant for years.

One example of a misconception based on the current procedure involved possible compensation for those involved with a project. Fan History Wiki had thought that if we joined, we might get some form of compensation either through hiring of one or more of our staff or for the domains. This belief was based on the proposal form on Strategy wiki, which has a section for required resources. Several proposals that exist on that wiki talk about the need for funding for these project in the hiring of staff, etc. Mike Lifehouse, in posting an off list reply to a follow up on our proposal, told me that this would never happen. geniice@gmail.com echoed his sentiments in an on list reply. If that is the case, then required resources on Strategy wiki needs a line in the template removing this expectation. This issue needs to be addressed by including a notation in the template so that people know this section should not include monetary related issues and a help guide should be created that specifically addresses how the issue of possible compensation is handled.

Other procedural problems occur regarding when a proposal is officially dead. There are new content proposals on Meta-Wiki that have been inactive for over a year. It is unfair to leave those volunteers in limbo. It is even worse to leave projects that may need to find a new home quickly because of changing circumstances in that state. The current policy regarding rejection is ambiguous and confusing. The best summary I could find about official rejection came from geniice@gmail.com who posted the following on Foundation-L during the follow up discussion about problems with the current proposal process:

I think it's time to stop messing you around. I'm not part of the foundation and I can't speak for it however:

1)at this point you basically have to assume the answer is no. The only people who could okay you joining are Sue Gardner or a direct board vote. Neither Sue nor the board have shown much interest and you are unlikely to get enough community backing to make them do so.

...

3)Timelines. The general rule with regards to wikimedia projects is that if something doesn't happen fast it probably won't happen and if it does it will take years.¹⁴

These are not obvious and none of this is articulated where people looking to be acquired can easily find it. If you're not entrenched in the system, this is not obvious and the lack of information is a major hurdle. Clear procedures and a timeline need to be established to prevent further confusion, to make things easier on existing Wikimedia Foundation staff when people approach them about being acquired, and for people interested in seeing their projects being acquired by the Foundation.

¹⁴ <http://lists.wikimedia.org/pipermail/foundation-l/2009-November/056274.html>