

Revisiting the Rabbit Hole: The Hypertextual Friction of Wikipedia

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Abstract

As information retrieval shifts toward LLM-based interfaces and algorithmic curation, the navigational, interpretive, and curatorial labor of reading is increasingly performed by systems rather than readers. We contribute Wiki Museum, a web-based design probe that makes these acts explicit as part of an active and “authorial” reading practice on Wikipedia, and an auto-ethnographic account illustrating the system through one author’s rabbit hole into the history of Wikipedia. We argue that the value of Wikipedia rabbit-holing lies in the authorial reading process, and point toward design directions that keep interpretive acts in readers’ hands.

Introduction

Wikipedia’s open, collaborative editing structure has been described as realizing the death of the author and the birth of the *reader as author*, blurring the boundary between readership and authorship (de Vugt, 2010). Wikipedia’s hypertextual wiki structure extends this authorial power to the act of reading itself. When a reader falls down a *Wikipedia rabbit hole*, following a curiosity-driven trail of links across articles (Piccardi et al., 2022), reading becomes a form of authorship. Internet artist Chia Amisola frames this directly, arguing that hypertextual web browsing is a performance of authorship and creativity (Amisola, 2024). Wikipedia rabbit-holing is authorship in this sense because readers make choices about where to linger and which links to follow, producing a path and authoring an experience that is their own.

We foreground three key acts in Wikipedia rabbit-holing: navigation, interpretation, and curation. Navigation is the act of traversing a hypertext and producing a traceable path (Liu and Almeda, 2026). Interpretation is the making of meaning through association and context. Curation is the deliberate collection and juxtaposition of concepts as associations form and understanding grows. Together, these acts constitute the reader-as-author. As information retrieval turns toward LLM-based interfaces and AI summaries (Glickman and Zhang, 2024), each of these acts is compressed or delegated to a system. Algorithmic curation similarly organizes and interprets knowl-

edge on the reader’s behalf (von Davier et al., 2024). The navigational, interpretive, and curatorial labor that was once the reader’s is increasingly performed by the system, and the reader-author returns to the reader-consumer.

This paper extends our prior work on *hypertextual friction*, a design framework that treats friction, structure, and traceability as design values for preserving user agency on the algorithmic web (Liu and Almeda, 2025). We contribute: Wiki Museum, a web-based Wikipedia wrapper interface that supports navigation, interpretation, and curation as an authorial reading practice, and an auto-ethnographic account tracing one author’s own Wikipedia rabbit hole into the intellectual and cultural history of Wikipedia, illustrating the system using its default curated topics list. We close with tangible future study directions for designing systems that support user agency in AI-mediated knowledge environments.

Wiki Museum & Auto-Ethnography

Wiki Museum makes explicit navigation, interpretation, and curation as an authorial reading practice on Wikipedia, and is available with a pre-populated default museum at <https://sophiawliu.github.io/fieldtrip/#/museum-wiki/default/graph?museum=default>.

Museum curators organize exhibits through the intentional selection, juxtaposition, and contextual framing of displayed items, shaping visitor interpretation by making item relationships explicit. Where algorithmic curation in personalized social media recommendations increasingly fills this role (von Davier et al., 2024), Wiki Museum positions the reader as curator of their own evolving, curiosity-driven exhibit. Just as readers are authors on Wikipedia, navigators are curators on Wiki Museum. Navigation, interpretation, and curation are simultaneous and interrelated acts rather than sequential ones, so we make the arbitrary choice of detailing curation first.

Curation While reading a Wikipedia article, one encounters an expanse of text speckled with blue links, each a potential path to a new article driven by personal curiosity and active choice. By the end of a rabbit-holing session, a reader has accumulated a collection of interrelated article topics that together form a new understanding of some aspect of the world. This collection exists first

in the reader’s mind, held together by the associations formed through reading and navigating. Wiki Museum gives that collection a form, allowing readers to import a scoped set of Wikipedia pages, add and remove topics as their understanding evolves, and explore the relationships among them across three coordinated *List*, *Wiki*, and *Graph* views.

Navigation & Interpretation Once topics are curated and imported, the *List* view displays the scoped set. From *List* view, the user can open each topic’s *Wiki* view which pulls directly from the topic’s original Wikipedia page except with embedded links constrained to the curated topic set (Figure 1). The *Graph* view renders the entire collection as a network of articles as nodes and their links as edges, where clicking a node shows the article’s incoming, outgoing, and mutual links among the scoped set (Figure 2). Moving between these views allows understanding to evolve as associations emerge through reading and inspecting the graph, and are made explicit through its visualization, and readers can add or remove topics from their curated set at any time.

Auto-Ethnography The default Wiki Museum collection reflects one author’s prior Wikipedia rabbit hole into the intellectual and cultural history of Wikipedia. The author began on the “Wiki,” article which led to “Hypertext,” “Ted Nelson,” “*Computer Lib/Dream Machines*,” the “*Whole Earth Catalog*,” “Stewart Brand,” the “Counterculture of the 1960s,” and “Intentional community,” before returning to “Wiki.” Importing this initial curated set into Wiki Museum and moving between the *Graph* and *Wiki* views led to expected additions like “San Francisco Bay Area,” “Do it yourself,” “Hacker culture,” and “Internet,” as well as unexpected ones like “Ayn Rand,” “Tech bro,” and “Grok.” In this authorial reading process, navigation, interpretation, and curation unfolded simultaneously and serendipitously via a flow between the three views and an evolving curated museum scope.

Discussion

As our information ecosystem shifts toward algorithmic interfaces, Wikipedia remains a site of authorial reading process, where rabbit-holing affords navigation, interpretation, and curation driven by the reader. Recommendation systems and LLM-based chat and summary interfaces increasingly perform all three on the reader’s behalf, removing friction in the name of efficiency. Wikipedia’s hypertextual structure and full-length original articles afford the serendipitous encounter with an unexpected topic, the context surrounding a link, and the active choice of what to read next. It is this interpretive labor that is being automated away, turning an active, authorial reading process back into a passive one.

Wiki Museum is a design probe for this argument. Even if an algorithm could curate a topically similar col-

lection, the value lies in the process of navigating, interpreting, and curating that collection (von Davier et al., 2024). Wiki Museum points toward a design paradigm that keeps these interpretive acts in the reader’s hands, and raises the question of how future systems built on or alongside Wikipedia and other human-authored media might be designed to do the same.

Limitations of this work include a single-authored auto-ethnographic account and no empirical user study for the Wiki Museum system. Our ongoing work includes tracing and comparing reading activity in Wikipedia rabbit hole sessions with real users, as well as expanding these ideas in a full study. On the Wiki Museum interface side, planned improvements include smoother integration between views to support a more seamless collapse of navigation, interpretation, and curation, as well as a force-directed *Graph* view to improve legibility. These directions advance our work towards supporting authorial reading process in an age of algorithmic mediation.

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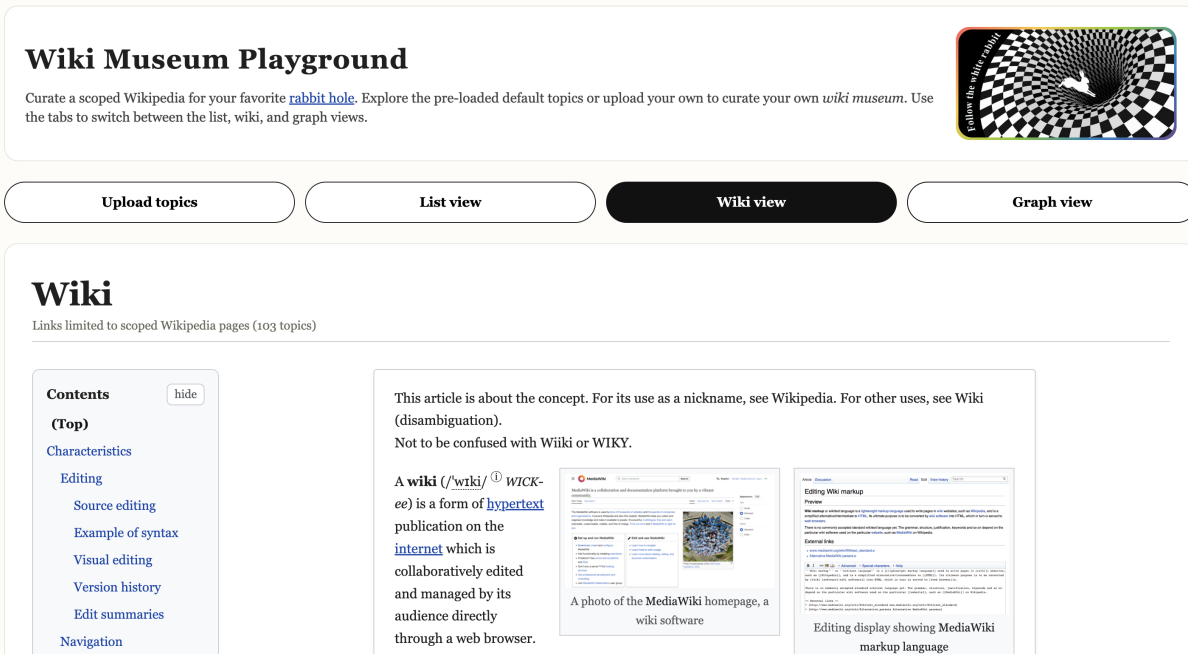


Figure 1: Wiki view within Wiki Museum. Articles are fetched via the Wikimedia REST API and presented in a simulated Wikipedia layout, with embedded links constrained to the curated topic set.



Figure 2: Graph view of a curated Wiki Museum collection. Nodes represent Wikipedia article topics and edges represent hyperlinks between them within the scoped set. Clicking a node surfaces its incoming, outgoing, and mutual links, making the relational structure of the evolving collection explicit.