

Wikis, RSS, Mashups, and Virtual Worlds

In this chapter you will learn about:

- © Wikis and how they harness the collaborative nature of a user community
- © RSS feeds, how people use them to stay up-to-date with new content, and how an increasing number of businesses are using them to keep current and potential customers updated on company activities
- © Mashups and how they give marketers a unique opportunity to present features and information pulled together from other social media tools
- © Virtual worlds, how people communicate using avatars, and how marketers pursue marketing opportunities by building and promoting a virtual online presence

While social networking sites, blogs, and video-sharing sites continue to weave themselves into the daily lives of countless Web users, the popularity of many other social media tools also continues to grow. Wikis and RSS feeds are two tools that have proven invaluable to marketers, developers, and Web users alike. Mashups and virtual worlds play a lesser but still important role in the ever-growing social media world.

Wikis

In the growing universe of online social media, wikis tend to command little media spotlight or developer attention. This is ironic, however, since of all social media tools, **wikis** (Web sites or pages that visitors can edit without needing to know any programming code or languages) most embody the essence of what social media is all about.

Wiki sites are collaborative by nature. They are built by community involvement; the community is made up of any site user that wishes to contribute information or edit content already on the page. These users do not need to know programming—they just need to be willing to share their information with others.

The best way to explain a wiki site is through example. Suppose you and some friends, John and Mary, decide to throw a party. Since you live miles away from each other and have different schedules, it is difficult to organize everything in advance. You try e-mail, but quickly find out that this is inefficient. People are e-mailing at different times, and for each e-mail sent to the group, a different document exists in each person's inbox. You all decide that it would be much easier if there was one central place where everyone could go to get and share information about the party, so you decide to use a wiki site. You start with a page called "Party Planning." You click the "Edit" button and create a list showing what you will need for the party: 'food,' 'drinks,' and 'dance music.' When you are done, you click the "Save" button, and the page is published for all to see.

Soon John comes to the page and decides to add some information. He clicks the "Edit" button, and he adds 'invitations' to the list. He also changes the word 'food' to 'potato chips and pretzels' to be more specific. He clicks the "Save" button, and the new updated list is published.

Mary later visits the page, and she too clicks the "Edit" button, adding party games to the list. She also highlights the 'dance music' entry, and clicks the "Link" button. This creates a new page called "Dance

Music” where a list of suggested dance CDs can be created. She clicks the “Save” button, and the updated page, with its new addition and new page link, is published.

Of course, John, Mary, and you are not the only ones who can see this page. It turns out a lot of people are organizing parties, and other people start visiting the page to help in their own planning. Some people just stop by to read the page. Others add items like ‘party games’ to the list; a few visitors add entire articles about different types of parties or tips for entertaining. Still others create links to different sites that offer more party-planning advice. Thus, the page and the site grow through online collaboration by the community of people who have interest in and knowledge of the topic.

Wikis first came into being in 1995, on a site called WikiWikiWeb, developed by renowned computer programmer Ward Cunningham. By 2005, it had grown to over 30,000 pages,¹ underscoring the power in the collaborative efforts of a community of online editors. In his book, *The Wiki Way: Quick Collaboration on the Web*, Ward describes the heart and soul of the wiki technology:

- A wiki invites all users to edit any page or to create new pages within the wiki Web site, using only a plain-vanilla Web browser without any add-ons.
- Wiki promotes meaningful topic associations between different pages by making page link creation almost intuitively easy and showing whether an intended target page exists or not.
- A wiki is not a carefully crafted site for casual visitors. Instead it seeks to involve the visitor in an ongoing process of creation and collaboration that constantly changes the Web site landscape.²

Ward Cunningham created the wiki; however, it was Jimmy Wales who made it a household word. His site, Wikipedia, is not only one of the most popular sites on the Web, it also has helped provide wide exposure to the organizational and communication benefits that wikis can offer.

Wikipedia, shown in Figure 6-1 and Figure 6-2, is an online encyclopedia launched in January 2001. Wikipedia content is developed by a large community of site users who add their own research, thought, and knowledge to wiki pages that cover virtually any topic imaginable. According to Wikipedia’s own figures, as of April 2008, over 50 million people visit the site each month. Content is spread across over 10 million pages, in 253 languages.³

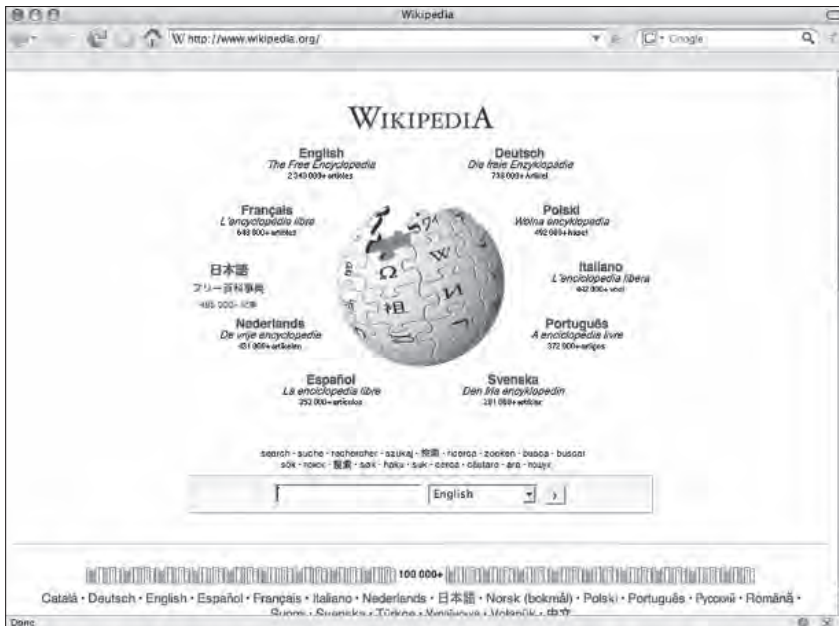


Figure 6-1 The home page for Wikipedia, the site that made wikis famous. Wikipedia is an online encyclopedia collaboratively developed by any users wishing to edit or add content.

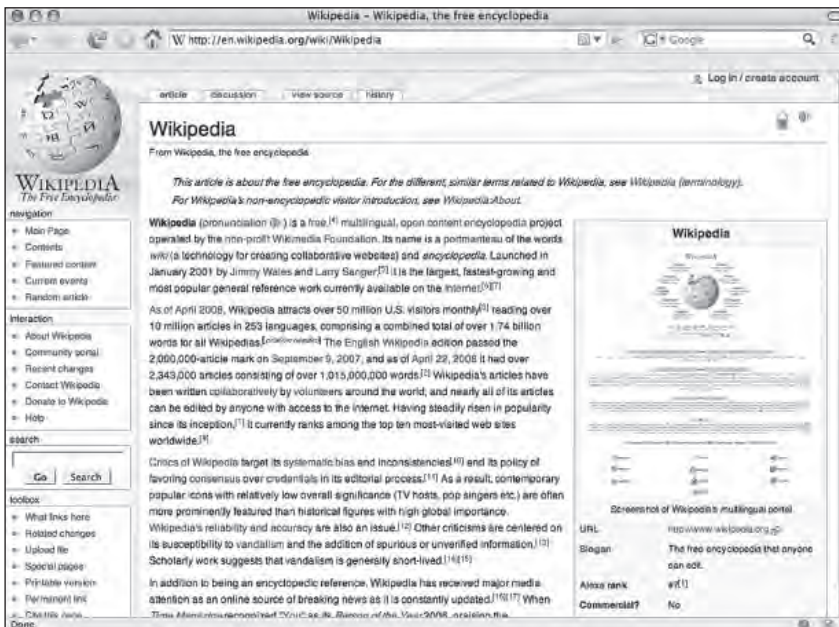


Figure 6-2 The category listing for Wikipedia. Users can gather information or be part of developing the content themselves.

Wikis closely embody the ideals of social media, in the sense that they allow for community-developed content. However, outside of sites like Wikipedia and AboutUs.org, wikis are often left out of mainstream social media conversations. Nonetheless, they are increasingly being adopted by companies for both internal and external purposes—in 2007, wikis were used by 37% of companies.⁴ Some organizations develop and run their own wiki sites; others contribute marketing-related content to existing sites. Internally, companies use wikis to help plan meetings, establish protocol, develop marketing strategies, and connect with their employees in a wide variety of ways. In these situations, clients and other outside entities are typically not invited to contribute or edit content.

Large companies find wikis especially valuable for internal use, as employees spread across different facilities and departments can use wikis for collaboration and content development. This content can include corporate policies, information on technology, marketing material, corporate history and background, and suggestions for team building—absolutely anything on which company employees can collaborate. With internal wikis, coworkers can brainstorm and collaborate in ways that were not possible before, easily communicating with each other regardless of position or geography.

INTERVIEW WITH...

WARD CUNNINGHAM AND RAY KING

AboutUs.org is a wiki-based site that connects Web sites and businesses to each other through millions of user-editable pages. I was pleasantly surprised by how easy it was to get in touch with site founder, Ray King, and how accommodating he was in speaking with me about his site. As we started to talk, Ray gave me one more shock: he asked if I'd like to include Ward Cunningham in the interview. A little stunned, I asked, "You can get in touch with him?" to which Ray replied, "I think so. He's sitting ten feet from me."

Needless to say I jumped at the opportunity. To have the founder of one of the best sites on the Web, along with one of the Web's most influential and innovative programmers, together for one interview is immensely exciting—especially given the value that Ray and Ward's insights can provide to both programmers and marketers.

JASON: Let's start with the basics. Ward, in your words, what is a wiki and how did you come up with the idea for it?

WARD: I think of wiki in a lot of different ways. Mostly when I created it, I was trying to create a place on the Internet where a group of people can work together and make a new kind of document—at

the time we called it a new kind of literature—that people could use to write about things that were important to them in a collaborative way. The problem we were facing was that my field of computer programming was being directed by textbooks and by the trade press in a direction that just seemed wrong. It didn't jive with people's experience, and programming is really a style of writing that honors practical experience. Before then, scientific literature was the model to be admired and it favored new invention; everything had to be novel to be publishable. We thought that the well-worn things that everybody should know—but not everybody did—were important. So we needed to connect a bunch of people. I actually sat down and tried to write something like that by myself, and I realized that I simply didn't have enough experience.

We held a conference on the subject of how to change the literature of computer programming in the fall of 1994 at the University of Illinois, which was where the Mosaic browser had been written. I was hanging around after the conference, talking to graduate students. They told me that this new thing called the World Wide Web and the whole notion of hypertext is how we can express this new literature. They just looked at me and said, "Ward, we think you can build the site that hosts new literature."

JASON: Did you have any idea when you created this that it would have such an impact on the future of the Web?

WARD: I could tell I was on to something right away. One reason was that it was easy to do. It was easy to have kind of scattered thoughts and just start putting them in and then connect them later, and it worked. Of course that's how our experience is. My focus was on experience. Remember something and remember something else and you could weave it together after the fact. But at the time, every collaborative medium we had was a firehouse. We would just get more information than we could possibly process. If we took a week off and went on vacation we'd be completely out of touch by the time we got back. I could work on wiki, and I could feel really into it. I could go away for a week and come back, and it would be different. But it wasn't so changed that I couldn't pick up the threads. This was especially important for bringing new people into our community. They could find something that they sort of understood. New visitors could link from this and that and go in progressively larger circles. They would end up coming back to the same page, but would read it again because other people had added content. They would get a little more out of it on a second, third, or later reading.

JASON: Are you finding the community is made up of a core group of users, or is it a fluctuating and growing base?

WARD: My original site, WikiWikiWeb [see Figure 6-3], has actually kind of served its purpose. We've changed the way people think about computer programming, and I had some of the most inventive and vocal people as part of the early community. It was probably a core of 15 to 50 people, and those people have kind of gone on to other things. Most of them have become famous as part of this transformation and write books now instead of wiki pages. Regardless, even people with the most obscure knowledge still had a place to write.

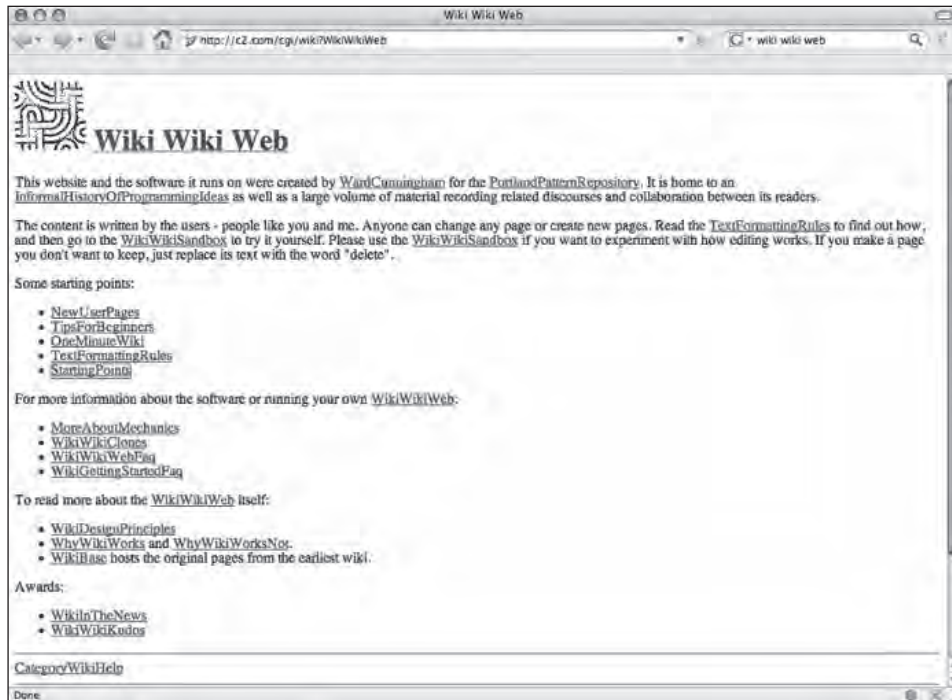


Figure 6-3 WikiWikiWeb—the original wiki by Ward Cunningham.

Now, let me just say that [the original wiki site] was created with an activist agenda—we wanted to change computer programming. That's very different from Wikipedia. The purpose of Wikipedia is to transmit knowledge, not to cause change. Of course, transmitting knowledge is going to cause plenty of change in its own right, but they don't want to change the knowledge. They just want to distribute it. We wanted people to talk about what they knew to be true. Wikipedia asks that people do no primary research and that entries only be summarized or explained in plain language, which makes Wikipedia an encyclopedia instead of an adventure in new literature. But this whole idea that you can go away for a week and come back and still find your way is very true to both my original wiki site and Wikipedia.

So, I had a purpose, and Wikipedia has a purpose. However, the concept of wiki itself as a medium has properties that influence both in identical ways. That's an interesting confirmation that something as simple as wiki can create a style of behavior among communities that is transferable.

JASON: Where did the name “wiki” come from?

WARD: I dubbed the technology ‘WikiWikiWeb’—‘wiki wiki’ being Hawaiian for very quick. Hawaiians will double a word for emphasis so wiki means quick and ‘wiki wiki’ means very quick.

JASON: Talk to me a little bit about the growth of wiki as a Web medium.

WARD: I was five years into my site when Jimmy Wales [founder of Wikipedia] was trying to make this new Web-based encyclopedia that kind of floundered. One of my regular community members, Ben Kovits, was having dinner with the fellow who was running Jimmy’s project and suggested they try wiki. They gave it a try, and it took off for them. Part of it is that wiki had been cloned [different versions of the original wiki had been created]. There were probably 30 versions at the time Wikipedia started, which were all derivative of my version.

Wikipedia is quite an accomplishment. They adjusted some of the principles that I adopted, and appropriately so, but the decision-making on that site has always been in recognition of the unique properties of wiki. In other words, the people who were running Wikipedia realized that it was also a work that would outlive its authors and that the community of authors was a very important part of the dynamic by which it was being created. So they’re always very careful to make decisions to not damage that relationship.

JASON: Are you happy in general with how wikis are evolving and being used?

WARD: I’m really pleased with Wikipedia. I think other wikis could do a lot more if they had a different attitude about the people they use. When you have a community of people creating something for you, you really owe them something. Paying attention to your user community and treating them with respect is very important. Wikipedia gets five stars for that. I think I might only get three stars for mine. I haven’t been perfect, but there are plenty of one star, no star sites out there that are simply exploitive. That frustrates me. But people fool around with those for a while, and then they’ll walk away when they realize they are being exploited. Some people just put up a wiki site and think, “Gee, I just put up this site, and people come and create stuff for me and then I capitalize on it.” That’s not the right way to think about it.

JASON: How do wikis fit into the larger social media universe of blogging and social networking and sharing sites?

WARD: Probably the biggest difference between blogging and wiki is that blogging is very much about the self. However, by the time you have everybody looking at each other's blog, you get this blogosphere phenomenon. The blogosphere seems a lot like wiki, but at its core, the blogosphere is a community first. If it happens to produce something of lasting value, that would be secondary. I don't think that they actually do. There's a lot of information, but its back to that firehouse again. Wiki is a work first. It's a collection of writings that's worth reading, and it's a work on its own. Community is a necessary part of it, but the community is there because they care about the work. I think that's really important.

I also think blogging is like a market economy of information—the wisdom of the crowd. I think of it as complicated way to do averaging. You want to get a little bit of everybody's voice and combine that into some sort of average. A wiki is not so much about the average. It's about finding the person or the few people whose voices just happen to have the missing part that we can all resonate around. A single individual can have a tremendous influence by just saying the right thing at the right time and the right place on a wiki. There's no averaging going on there. That makes it a very different medium. When you stand back, all three social media tools—the blogosphere, social networking and sharing sites, and wiki—are all enabled by the fact that we have a reasonably literate population in the world that has enough free time to contribute.

JASON: That being said, wikis seem to lag behind other social media tools like blogging and social networking sites, grabbing less of the spotlight. Why do you think that is?

RAY: I think that wiki is intuitively harder for people to grasp. The minute you say, "Hey, this Web site is open for anybody to edit," everyone immediately assumes that it can't work because people will destroy the site, and you'll have no control. I think that was the prevalent thinking for a long time. When Wikipedia emerged and it was obvious that it was going to be a success, people started taking notice. Wikipedia is just one wiki project, but it has proven that wiki technology works. That will open the doors to new projects and tons of stuff that we haven't thought of yet. They're coming down the pike.

JASON: Let's switch gears a little and talk about AboutUs.org [shown in Figure 6-4]. What is it, and why did you decide to build the site on wiki technology?



Figure 6-4 The Home page of AboutUs.org, a wiki-based site that connects and chronicles other Web sites and companies.

RAY: The goal of AboutUs.org is to provide a resource to users who may be interested in a particular organization. We give users the opportunity to see how that organization is connected to the rest of the world and what it's doing right now. We mainly focus on information about other Web sites. If a Web site is out there it means that one or a group of people trying to accomplish something—build a business, sell things online, or change the world in some way. They all want to do something to make the world different, so AboutUs is very forward-looking. The majority of data on our site really describes Web sites. We're more interested in knowing that this particular organization is a subsidiary of that company, and that company supplies to this other company, and this blog tends to write about this industry for which that company belongs. We're interested in that type of information and helping to connect the dots.

As for why it's based on wiki technology—I've always been a big fan of collaborative technologies. I think that it's so much easier to do good work when you have got more than one head working on it, and wiki allows you to do that. When I first saw the technology, I immediately gravitated towards it. I've always been the guy within

other organizations that thought about internal communications and Internet type systems, and wanted better ways to collaborate. And wiki . . . it was just sort of obvious to me that I wanted to work in this area.

JASON: Since AboutUs.org relies so heavily on community involvement, how did you get the site up to speed? What steps did you take to get people on the site and contributing content?

RAY: What I found was that when we asked people to come to the site and self-identify or make a page for themselves, describe themselves, describe their company, people for the most part all thought it was a great idea, said they would do it, but they never actually did. It's a new project, and people had to learn and start from a blank page, which can be a tough sell. We found that if we went ahead and started the page, and said, "Here's what we know about you, and it's probably not a lot, but I'm prepared to put something up there," then people were much more likely to edit the page, because it was already started for them, but might not be exactly right, or they'd want to add to it. That was kind of the key to building AboutUs—we would get pages started for people and in that way invite a lot more editing.

JASON: How can traditional companies benefit from using wiki technology as part of their marketing strategies?

WARD: We've been talking about wikis that find an underserved niche and serve it. I think another question is—if you're already a going brand, you have customers with whatever interest they have, and your job is to serve those customers while realizing that those customers are changing—how do you continue to serve those customers and maybe even reach out to serve more?

For the most part, companies provide information to their customers. They write a newsletter, for example, and they post it up on their site for people to download. It could be beneficial to a company to let their customers contribute their own thoughts to an online, customer-facing newsletter. I think that wiki offers some formulas that are worth examining. Customers would probably like getting to know more about their peers than your brand. That is, people would benefit in learning, in a non-exploitative way, about who else is using your product. For a company, that will be powerful information, because they'll discover things that are outside of their ability to even consider.

Another area where wikis can benefit companies is a little counter-intuitive to how most companies think. For most companies, their motivation is to extend the product to do more of the same.

Customers, however, tend to use the product as it is but often want to combine it with other products. My vision is always of the guy buying scientific equipment and hooking it up in complicated ways to do something new—something that none of the manufacturers or marketers would have thought of because they are not scientists, or maybe wouldn't have really liked because their products are being combined with competing products. People are innovative and will find ways to do new things with existing products. Wiki can create a community where people can share these ideas even if it's risky from the point of view of the company itself. I would say this to companies: better to be a participant with your customer community than to be abandoned by them; better to find that out early what your customers do and what they want and ask your customers to help you evolve.

JASON: How important do you think it is for a programmer to understand the marketing aspects of the sites that they are building?

WARD: I think it's really important, because if you just build a site that has some mechanism that you think is cool, three of your friends will tell you it is cool, and then that's done. Programmers have to have an understanding of what people are going to do on the site and what's going to motivate them to do it.

As a programmer, you could take an artistic approach and say you're going to program what you want and not care if people like it. But if you're programming a site and you expect to have growth and you want to make something with general appeal, then you have to understand people in general, not just assume you're making this for people just like you.

That's really important in building a business. I think anybody who's built a business beyond 30 customers knows that you have to understand your customers. If you're not customer-oriented, you're not going to survive. In that sense you can have a computer programmer who just says, "Tell me what to do and I'll do it." But that's not somebody who's creating; that's somebody who's just using a small amount of programming knowledge. If you're a developer that understands [the customer], you're developing a business at the same time you're developing technology.

RSS Feeds

Visually, RSS needs no introduction. Its bright orange and white icon has permeated practically every media-related site and blog on the Web (see Figure 6-5).



Figure 6-5 The symbol for RSS feed.

RSS is a Web feed that makes it easy for people to stay up-to-date with new content that is posted on a specific site. Although there is some debate as to what the letters RSS stand for (most sites and users have settled on Really Simple Syndication), few would debate how useful RSS can be.

For example, let's say a user clicks on the RSS icon on the New York Post's Web site. By doing so, they create a free subscription for themselves to that site. Of course, that doesn't mean that the paper will start arriving on their doorstep. It means that through the use of an XML (Extensible Markup Language) file they will get the digital equivalent. The feed will provide the most current headlines that the Post has added—without the user having to go directly to its site.

RSS has its roots in the Netscape browser, which developed an early version of the tool in 1999. It was not widely distributed until 2005, when, after years of revisions, updates, and controversy over publishing rights, Microsoft Internet Explorer, Outlook, and the Opera Web browser all adopted the icon shown in Figure 6-5. This icon had originally been introduced by the Mozilla Firefox browser. (Other icons do exist, but this remains the prominent means of identifying a feed.)

RSS feeds can be offered by any site (although traditionally they are offered by sites that update content often). These include blogs and file-sharing sites. On sites with a large volume of content or content that is segmented into a number of different categories, RSS feeds are often set up to allow users to subscribe to very specific information. Users can even customize their subscriptions based on keywords. The video-sharing site YouTube, for example, allows visitors to narrow the scope of their subscriptions. Users can subscribe to specific channels, most-watched videos, most-recently updated, etc. In addition, because each video is tagged with specific keywords for search purposes, users can subscribe to videos based on keywords, receiving, for example, a feed on all new videos tagged with the word "guitar." RSS feeds can usually be scheduled to scan for new information at any interval—every

few minutes or every few days. They can be turned off or deleted if the user loses interest in the topic. Figure 6-6 shows the RSS page for BusinessWeek's Web site. Users can subscribe to any number of feeds from stories, blogs, podcasts, or videos.

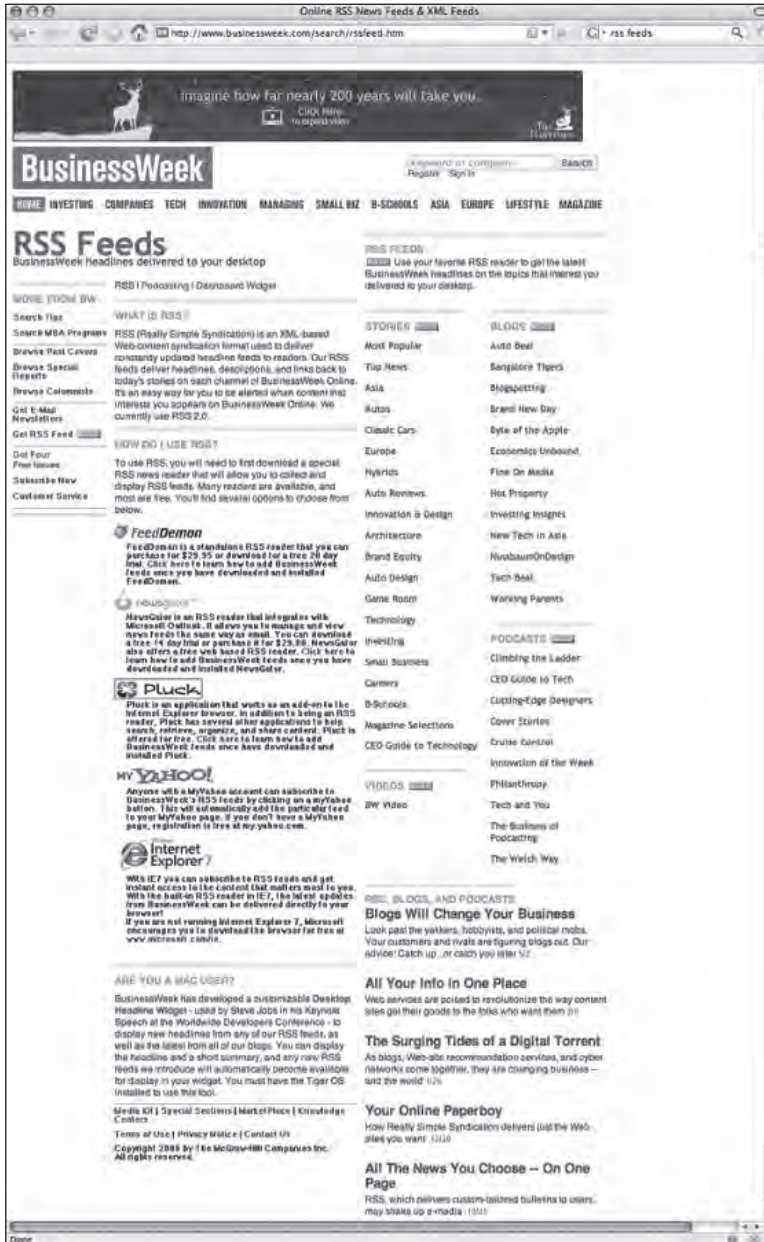


Figure 6-6 BusinessWeek's site allows users to subscribe to RSS feeds based on the category of information they are most interested in, and it provides links to various RSS readers for download.

Most large media sites have already adopted RSS feeds into their sites, and marketers are finding it useful as well. Distributors, for example, can alert retailers when new products have been stocked, and medical researchers can use RSS feeds to let doctors and other interested parties know about breakthrough techniques and findings. There is even an RSS feed for the Amber Alert, which provides information on missing children in an effort to locate them.

RSS is built using the XML programming language, and it reads headlines, titles, or short site summaries provided by the site developer. On the user side, these summaries are displayed through a program called an RSS reader, which accepts the feeds and displays them to the subscriber. RSS readers come preinstalled in most browsers; however, dozens of other readers are available for download. Some readers are free, while others require either a one-time payment for their software or a monthly subscription. Each has its own features, ranging from creating a running ticker in the browser window to more sophisticated customization options. Newsdesk, a reader shown in Figure 6-7, comes pre-installed with subscriptions to over 50 popular news sources and organizes feeds in a similar fashion to Microsoft Outlook's popular e-mail program.



Figure 6-7 An RSS reader, pulling in feeds from a large number of subscription sources.

With this and similar applications, users can create “watches.” A user enters keywords, and the reader searches all RSS feeds in its subscription base, returning content based on those words. This can be a fun feature

for hobbyists or those interested in specific news content, and it can prove particularly useful for marketers. Companies can use RSS feeds to keep up with competitor news and activities and, through subscriptions to blogs, stay abreast of movement and ideas within the marketplace. It can even help marketers keep track of rumors or news about their own company, saving valuable research time and giving them new insights.

Mashups

A **mashup** is exactly as it sounds, a blending together of information from multiple sources into one tool or site. Mashups blend multiple tools into a single offering that is often more powerful or useful than any of the tools would be on their own. For example, a music-based information Web site might pull concert locations for touring bands through RSS feeds and mash that information up with Google maps to show where the performance is taking place.

Figures 6-8 and 6-9 show screen shots of a mashup on the 2008 Gillette Young Guns (Gillette's NASCAR team) Web site. This mashup uses Google Maps to pinpoint NASCAR tracks across the country. It then allows users to zoom in for a close-up satellite view of each track, and it blends each location map with information and statistics about the specific track. In doing this, Gillette gives fans information about NASCAR racing, presented in a way that they otherwise couldn't have easily accessed through Google Maps or other NASCAR-affiliated sites.

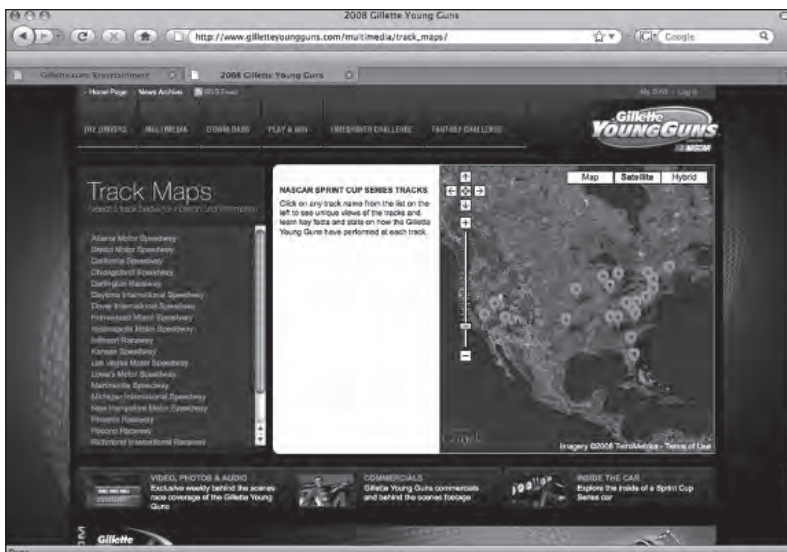


Figure 6-8 The Gillette NASCAR racing site includes a mashup that shows all of the racing tracks in the U.S. as pinpointed on maps fed in from Google.



Figure 6-9 When a user clicks on a track marker and zooms in, they see a close-up aerial view of the track and additional information about the track.

Mashups are quickly gaining popularity as more tools to create them are popping up around the Web. Google, Yahoo, and Microsoft have each launched beta or completed versions of sites that help users create mashups. These sites also include social networking areas where visitors can share their mashup ideas with others. Figure 6-10 shows the home page for Popfly, Microsoft's proprietary site, which helps users create mashups (Popfly also helps users develop Web sites and games). Figure 6-11 shows how a mashup comes together. Like many other mashup creation sites, Popfly gives users an easy-to-use toolbox of sites and applications to pull information from and a highly visual approach to combining this information. Figure 6-12 shows the final result, in this case a mashup that combines mapping tools with traffic news updates to show location and information about traffic in and around the Seattle area.



Figure 6-10 The Home page of Microsoft's Popfly.com gives users the tools to easily create and share applications, including mashups.

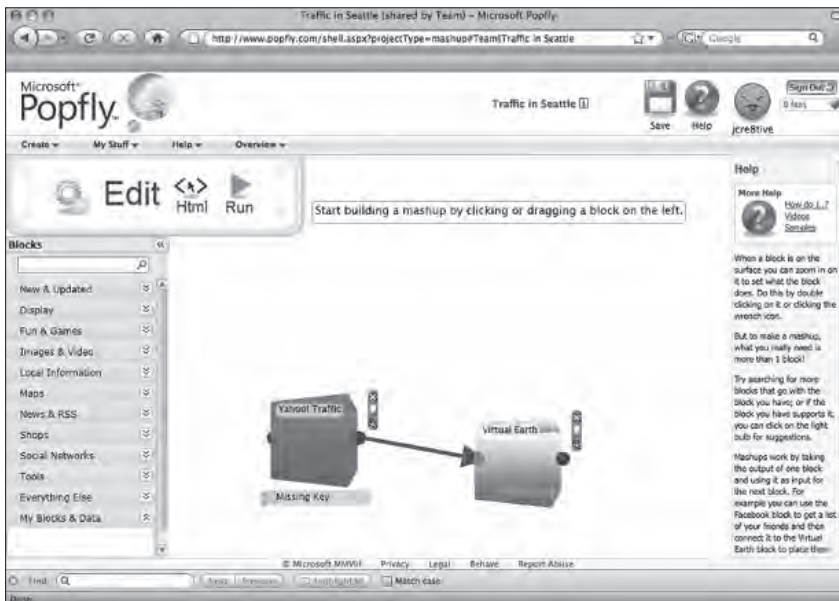


Figure 6-11 Once in Popfly, users can create their own mashups by connecting social media tools and information from various sites to develop a unique application. With Popfly, these connections are made using object-based graphic representations of individual tools, eliminating the need for programming.



Figure 6-12 The result of the mashup being created in Figure 6-11, this tool blends local news with a third-party mapping program to display traffic problems in the Seattle area.

From a marketing perspective, mashups allow companies to provide a unique offering that rival sites might not present. An e-commerce site that sells books, for example, could create a mashup that combines recently reviewed and bestselling books with an online calendar of when and where the author of those books will be signing copies (and, of course, include links for shoppers to buy those titles online). An online media site could create a mashup by pulling tags from multiple sources (including popular blogs) and representing them in a graphical interface unique to that site. While the individual parts may not be original, the end result can be a lure that keeps people engaged and coming back.

Virtual Worlds

Virtual worlds are like social networking sites on steroids. A **virtual world** is an online environment built to reflect either the real world or some type of fantasy realm in which users can interact and explore. By using an **avatar** (an icon or model used

to represent a user), a person can meet and interact with other people. Often, these environments are three dimensional. Some virtual worlds are created for the purposes of online gaming. In an MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game), large numbers of players compete with each other in a virtual world, strive to reach new levels, or amass points in an attempt to win the game or complete specific tasks. (Figure 6-13 shows a scene from Disney's popular *Pirates of the Caribbean* online MMORPG, in which users can create their own pirate avatars and go on quests and adventures.)



Figure 6-13 A scene from the online MMORPG, “Pirates of the Caribbean,” where users from all over the world pursue adventures through their pirate avatars.

Other virtual worlds, like Second Life (shown in Figure 6-14) are not games at all, but are social platforms in which people can meet other people and use virtual currency to build homes, shop at virtual malls, or start in-world businesses. Like a hybrid between a real-life social setting and an online social network, virtual worlds often bring people together in virtual dance clubs, arcades, beach parties, concerts, and other similar events.



Figure 6-14 The inside of a home in Second Life. Using personalized avatars, users explore, communicate, shop, and build homes and businesses in the 3D virtual environment.

As of July 2008, Second Life is the largest and most populated virtual world, with about 550,000 unique visitors per week.⁵ Although this is still relatively small compared to standard social networks like MySpace or Facebook, marketers and the media are starting to pay close attention to virtual worlds as an up-and-coming resource for bringing people together. As Figure 6-15 shows, press coverage for Second Life has increased significantly.⁶ It is likely that this attention will continue and traffic to Second Life and other virtual worlds will continue to build as more homes add broadband connections (virtual worlds are often very cumbersome, and require powerful computers and faster connections to work properly).

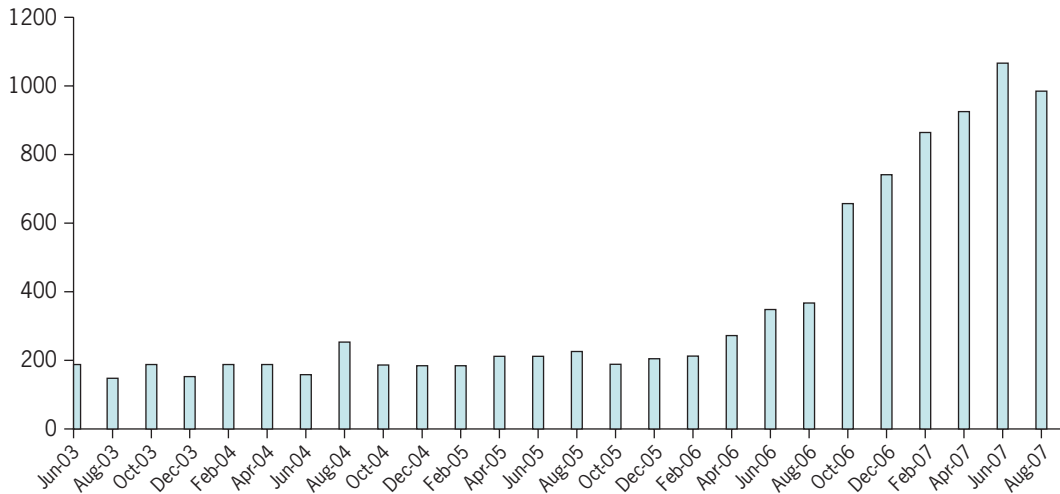


Figure 6-15 Mentions of Second Life in the press. Once the media took notice of Second Life, it quickly gained significant attention. SOURCE: LexisNexis <<http://w3.nexis.com>>, Jan. 2007.

This increase in popularity hasn't gone unnoticed by companies who are quickly seeking potential marketing opportunities. For some marketers, these opportunities have come in the form of advertisements within Second Life and sponsorships of pre-planned events, such as the Coca-Cola stage shown in Figure 6-16. Other companies have built entire corporate presences in Second Life, where consumers can come to find out more information about products, talk to customer service representatives, or just stay in touch with the brand. Larger companies, whose employee base is spread across the country or throughout the world, have also been finding valuable internal uses for Second Life by creating virtual meeting places where everyone can congregate (individually represented by their avatar) and sit in on a meeting to review sales, marketing, or other important issues. Figures 6-17 shows the Second Life presence for Sears, while Figure 6-18 shows how a meeting can be held in the virtual world.



Figure 6-16 A concert stage sponsored by Coca-Cola, one of the many advertisers that uses special events in Second Life as a marketing vehicle to promote their brand.



Figure 6-17 The inside of a Sears in Second Life, where visitors can find out more about Sears products.



Figure 6-18 A meeting held in Second Life. Employees from around the world attend by having their avatars sit in on the meeting.

While there are many reasons to believe that virtual worlds have promising futures as social networks and tools for marketers, there are some reasons for concern, with much of this concern falling on the shoulders of market leader, Second Life. For as much as Second Life has helped generate vast interest in virtual worlds as a social and marketing platform, as of the writing of this book there are equally compelling reasons to believe Second Life may falter and set the virtual world movement back. In July 2007, Time Magazine listed Second Life as one of the five worst sites on the Web, noting, “Visually, this vast virtual world can be quite impressive, but it’s notoriously slow to load (it runs on free software you have to download) and difficult to navigate, even with a broadband connection . . . The corporate world’s embrace of the place as a venue for staff meetings and training sessions does seem to lend Second Life a layer of legitimacy. But maybe it’s a case of some CEOs trying too hard to be hip.”⁷ While some companies are still exploring and investing in opportunities to market themselves in Second Life, others are closing up shop in the nascent platform, with companies like American Apparel and BMW abandoning efforts due to lack of tangible results. Like the Web itself, which had to go through a period of rapid growth followed by a spectacular collapse before it could really define itself, the future of virtual worlds has yet to be written.

INTERVIEW WITH...**JODY DEVERE: ASKPATTY.COM**

Jody Devere is the president of AskPatty.com, a Web site that provides car advice to women, and she sits on the board of directors for the United Spinal Association (USA), a non-profit organization dedicated to helping people with spinal cord injuries and disorders. Jody heads up USA's Motorability Island (see Figures 6-19 and 6-20), a Second Life island with race tracks and other racing-related activities where people can come to watch or participate in a series of scheduled events. Jody recently talked with me about Motorability Island and how Second Life has helped them reach a new a growing audience base.



Figure 6-19 The outside of USA's Motorability Speedway race track. Users can buy Second Life cars for their avatars (using real money that is donated to USA), meet other racing enthusiasts, or watch scheduled races.

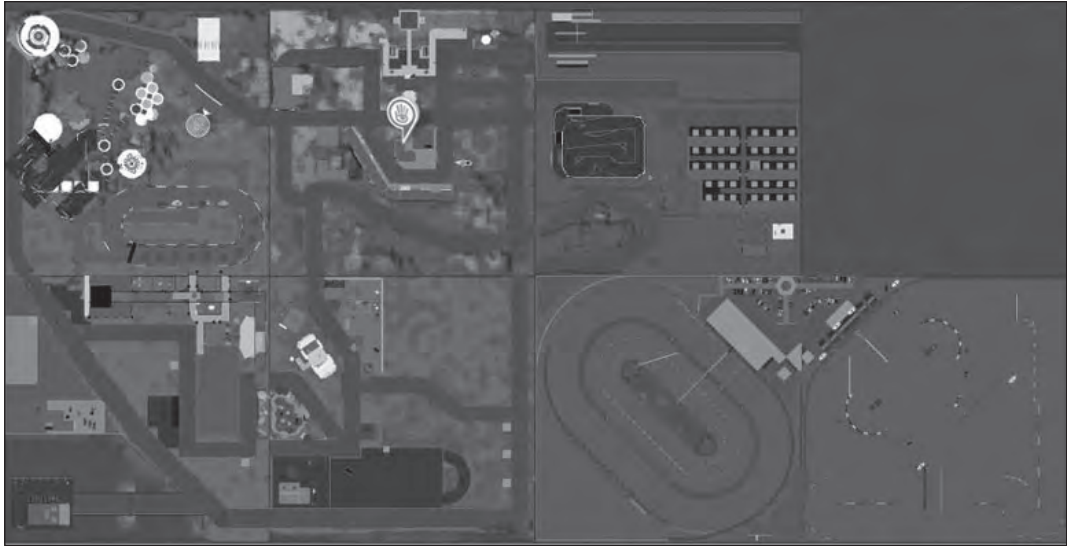


Figure 6-20 An aerial view of Motorability Island. The island has numerous racing tracks, go-cart tracks, a dance hall, and roadways for casual driving. It also features homes for volunteers and sponsors, and provides information on USA and how people can make donations.

JASON: How did you come to have an association with United Spinal Association?

JODY: We were a car-related business dedicated to women, and we've adopted United Spinal as our charity due to their motor sports program as well as their motor safe program. My own son is paraplegic, so they've helped me and my family a great deal. I am very dedicated to the great work that they do, especially for veterans; my son is a veteran.

I took AskPatty and United Spinal into Second Life at the end of 2007. Pontiac had an island with a racetrack, but decided that they wanted to end their marketing efforts in Second Life and were going to close the island. We were all notified, because we had sponsored the island. During that time we had become very close to the core residents of the island [virtual homes had been built there], and had really built a great racing community. There were a lot of synergies with the island community, and I felt really bad it was closing. The residents were up in arms. On a fluke I went to Pontiac, and I said "Hey, would you donate the island to my charity—United Spinal? We will carry on the car culture and support the residents." They said, "Yes."

JASON: That's a great idea.

JODY: Pontiac had created a community rather than just put up beautiful buildings hoping that people would come. It was a very active community and still is. There is the main racetrack, but there are also dances and events. All the residents were very actively involved in the community, promoting it, and making it a place that people would want to come to. Anyway, I took it over under the banner of United Spinal Association. Most of the core residents stayed on, and the island has developed into a very active and popular place in Second Life. Plus, we've added an NHRA (National Hot Rod Association) style straight track, and we have cart racing. There is also the United Spinal Walking Center, which is a mirror image of all of the services available to spinal cord-injured persons or persons with spinal cord disease through United Spinal Association. We just have so many things to do. We even have podcasts of the Action Online Magazine [the USA official magazine], which is very cool in podcast version.

JASON: Is there a reason why the island is so popular?

JODY: There is a very large disabled community in Second Life, because it allows people to get a 'Second Life' especially if they spend way too much time at home. In my son's situation, because he's not well enough to go out, it enables him to create relationships and have some activities that don't require mobility.

JASON: What's the benefit to USA? What do they gain by maintaining a presence in Second Life?

JODY: The benefits are endless. Of course, it's a public relations platform. The media outside of Second Life is always interested in what's going on in the metaverse [virtual universe], because it's still such a curiosity. Within Second Life, we've gotten a great deal of exposure and have done multiple interviews in the virtual world.

The main benefit is in securing donations. Not the 'in your face, send me money' kind of donations, but by community participation. For instance, when you buy a virtual racecar from the racetrack [paid for with real money], a portion of that goes to United Spinal. It's very clear that that's happening around the island, but it's not in your face until we hold fundraising events like events over the weekend. People have been very generous.

And the events are not just for people who are disabled. In fact, I wouldn't want it that way. I think that's one of the great things about Second Life is that it has supercharged public relations for United Spinal. It is also sort of an older charity, and Second Life has given them a boost as a more up-to-date kind of charitable organization innovator. Those are some of the branding images that they would

like to have going forward as they do more things online. This newly minted brand image isn't just for people with disabilities, it's for everybody. We have a large population of people without disabilities coming to the island to participate in scheduled events and becoming more aware of the USA brand.

JASON: When you say “scheduled events,” what does that mean? Is it a scheduled race or open race time? Are there concerts on the island?

JODY: We have all of those. If you go to Motorability.com you can view a Google calendar [mashup] of weekly scheduled events. We'll also have special occasion events like a summer concert series or the Veterans and Memorial Day weekend events. We even have a club on the island called Parcade that's holding almost daily dancing events.

JASON: And when you have one of these events, how many people come on average?

JODY: It's hard to say, because every event is different. But in general we average between 10,000 and 15,000 visitors a month, which is really outstanding.

People come to Second Life to do stuff. They want a job. They want to have something to do. They just don't want to walk around. Some of them are more gamers; they want stuff to keep them active and engaged. You know, they want a race; they want to have fun. They want to get skills. They want to learn to build their own virtual cars or homes. In fact, I have a place called Motorability Springs that teaches people how to become builders. In different months we promote different things to come and do, but then there are regularly scheduled events. You don't come to Second Life just to sit around, and I think new users need to join groups. They need to get reading the Avistar and the Metaverse Messenger, which are the Second Life newspapers, to catch up on all the things there are to do and where to go and the calendar of events—not just on Motorability Island, but everywhere within Second Life. By the way, my racetrack is on the calendar of events in those magazines. And it's a very popular place to come. So, you know that's the secret of success. You just can't have a building or store, expect people to show up, and tell them to buy something. You have to give them something to do and look for other ways to benefit from the virtual presence.

Chapter Summary

- Wiki sites are made up of pages written and edited by an online community. Users have the ability to edit and add information to a wiki page, and link those pages to other relevant pages on the site. Although Wikis are not always thought about in the same arena as other social media tools such as file-sharing sites, blogging, or social networking sites, they are gaining in popularity. Wikis are particularly useful for marketers looking to improve communications among their own employees.
- RSS feeds are an easy way to keep track of updates, headlines, and site summaries. Users can view feeds via RSS readers, many of which can be downloaded for free. Large sites typically provide opportunities to subscribe to RSS feeds by category or keyword. While most major media outlets already provide RSS feeds from their sites, an increasing number of businesses are using them to keep current and potential customers updated on company activities.
- Mashups pull together different tools and information to create a unique application or offering. Mashups are increasing in popularity, and numerous sites that facilitate the creation of mashups are beginning to appear online. Marketers can use mashups to engage their audiences in ways that competing sites don't.
- Virtual worlds allow users to represent themselves with an avatar to play games, meet other people, market their brands, and build businesses. While there is still some question as to whether market leader Second Life will propel the metaverse to greatness or crumble, it is clear that marketers see potential in virtual worlds and will continue to seek ways to harness their vast marketing power.

Key Terms

avatar—An icon or model used to represent a user in a virtual world.

mashup—A blending together of information from multiple sources into one tool or site.

RSS—A Web feed that makes it easy for people to stay up-to-date with new content that is posted on a specific site.

virtual world—An online environment built to reflect either the real world or some type of fantasy realm in which users can interact and explore.

wiki—Collaborative Web site or individual pages that visitors can edit without needing to know any programming code or languages.

Review Questions

1. The growth of wikis depends mostly on:
 - a. Creativity in page design
 - b. Content written by site developers
 - c. Community involvement
 - d. Successful linking to the blogosphere

2. How many pages are wiki sites limited to?
 - a. 20
 - b. 30,000
 - c. 5,000,000
 - d. Unlimited

3. Users who visit a typical wiki site are usually allowed to add new content, but usually are not allowed to edit existing content. True or False?

4. Wikipedia has content in:
 - a. 20 languages
 - b. 100 languages
 - c. 200 languages
 - d. Over 250 languages

5. In 2007, what percentage of companies used wikis?
 - a. 37%
 - b. 49%
 - c. 59%
 - d. 69%

6. The literal translation of the Hawaiian word “wiki” is:
 - a. Quick
 - b. Unlimited
 - c. Wide
 - d. Trick question—“wiki” is actually a Spanish word, not a Hawaiian word.

7. The early seeds for wiki were first planted during a conversation between Ward Cunningham and graduate students at the University of Illinois, which was also the home of which invention?
 - a. The Netscape browser
 - b. The Mosaic browser
 - c. The first MySpace page
 - d. The first blog
8. The first wiki site was created with an activist agenda, for the purpose of:
 - a. Promoting commercial use of the Web
 - b. Changing the literature of computer programming
 - c. Lobbying the government for increased Web funding
 - d. Reducing online pornography
9. The primary difference between WikiWikiWeb and Wikipedia is that:
 - a. The purpose of WikiWikiWeb was to cause change, while the purpose of Wikipedia is to transmit knowledge.
 - b. Although Wikipedia has the word “Wiki” in its title, it is actually based on a completely different technology.
 - c. The purpose of Wikipedia is to cause change, while the purpose of WikiWikiWeb was to transmit knowledge.
 - d. Wikipedia is a public site, while WikiWikiWeb was only open to a select few users in the community.
10. AboutUs.org’s primary purpose is:
 - a. To connect job seekers with employers
 - b. To provide profile pages for up and coming celebrities
 - c. To connect Web sites and business to each other
 - d. To compete with Wikipedia as another online encyclopedia

11. According to Ward Cunningham, which of the following is based on the averaging of information?
 - a. Wikis
 - b. Social networking sites
 - c. Blogs
 - d. Product reviews on e-commerce sites

12. Wikis can help companies by:
 - a. Acting as inexpensive blogs
 - b. Getting their customers to discuss the brand rather than just read information about it
 - c. Allowing people to post profiles of themselves
 - d. Find information on job openings more easily

13. The RSS icon is typically:
 - a. Red
 - b. Orange
 - c. Green
 - d. Animated

14. RSS is built on which of the following programming languages?
 - a. HTML
 - b. C++
 - c. XML
 - d. Java

15. RSS gained widespread distribution when:
 - a. It was first unveiled in 1999
 - b. The logo developed by Firefox was adopted by IE, Outlook, and others
 - c. CNN and Fox News began using it to distribute their news
 - d. YouTube first featured a video on how to use it

16. YouTube allows visitors to narrow the scope of their RSS subscriptions using which of the following criteria?
 - a. Specific channels
 - b. Most-watched videos
 - c. Specific keywords
 - d. All of the above
17. Mashups are best defined as:
 - a. A number of blogs combined on one site
 - b. More than one person contributing to a wiki
 - c. A blending together of information from multiple sources into a single tool or site
 - d. A software programs that organize numerous RSS feeds
18. Mashups are fun applications for hobbyists, but they provide no real benefits to a company looking to market itself on the Web. True or False?
19. In most Virtual Worlds, people identify themselves with:
 - a. Their photo
 - b. Their avatar
 - c. Their digital signature
 - d. Their wiki entry
20. According to Jody Devere, the best way to be successful in Second Life is:
 - a. To have pre-planned, scheduled events
 - b. To trust that people will find your brand online over time through word of mouth
 - c. To build bigger buildings than any other brands
 - d. Virtual worlds are still so new, there's no way for brands to be successful there yet

Projects

1. Suppose you worked for a company that wanted you to build a wiki. How would you do it? What languages or software would you need? Research and write a summary of your findings.

2. Using AboutUs.org, do a “six degrees of separation” analysis. Start with one entry, and follow it through to a related site, and then another related site, until you show six sites in total. In a two-page paper, write about how these sites are connected.
3. Write the code needed to produce an RSS feed from a Web page.
4. Find a social media tool or application that has not been discussed in this book. Write a one-page summary of the tool and how it could help marketers.
5. Using Popfly, create a functional mashup. In a one-page paper, discuss the different elements that you combined, and how your mashup could benefit users more than any of the elements alone. Would the mashup you created have any value to a marketer? If so, explain how and why.

Endnotes

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