



Man with a mission: Jimmy Wales wants to bring the encyclopedia to the masses.

pored over pages of the World Book Encyclopedia, sparking a lifelong interest in self-directed learning. “Even in college, I learned more at the library by being a geek than I did in class,” says Wales.

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Today, he lives in St. Petersburg, Fla., not far from a climate-controlled facility in Tampa where three racks of servers process more than 60 million Wikipedia hits per day. The site is ranked 50th on alexa.com’s top 100 most popular web sites, blowing away britannica.com and even scoring better than nytimes.com. “I’m a pathologically optimistic person,” says Wales, “so, in one sense, I always expected it to be big.”

But realistically, Wales never imagined this sort of success, and he credits the thousands of volunteer Wikipedia editors. According to Wales, many Wikipedia editors are “a particular type of extremely information-hungry, geeky kind of person.” They go by usernames like Lord Emsworth — who, in reality, is a 16-year-old boy who has written lively articles on British nobility. They deliberate over the English and German names of towns and rivers in Poland. They work together to define the term “heavy metal umlaut.”

Their passion, however, is no trivial pursuit. Wikipedia’s goal is not revenue or web site hits — it’s simply to provide a free encyclopedia to everyone in the world, in their own language. “We have the technology to do it. We have the people to do it. Now somebody needs to do it,” says Wales. “So we’re doing it.” — *John Patrick Pullen*

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

WIKIPEDIA’S JIMMY WALES EMANCIPATES THE ENCYCLOPEDIA

Ashlee Simpson has problems. Problems beyond her “vocal track.” Problems that have nothing to do with her singing at all. “How is the fact that Ashlee Simpson got her mouth washed out with soap ... at all encyclopedic, notable, or even interesting?” asks a posting on wikipedia.org, a freely licensed online encyclopedia.

According to Jimmy Wales, the web site’s founder, the Ashlee Simpson entry is among Wikipedia’s most problematic. “It’s not like the information is difficult or incorrect,” he says, “but it makes the article too tedious and long.”

Wales was inspired to start Wikipedia by the Free Software Foundation, a group that aims to create and distribute license-free computer programs. “I thought, wow, this idea of people collaborating to build something of value online — it’s got to be bigger than software,” says Wales. Using a web application called a Wiki, which allows anyone to contribute to or edit a web site, Wales made the first post on the Wikipedia (“hello world”) in January 2001. Today, the site contains 1.5 million articles in 195 different languages.

Before he began work on the nonprofit venture, the 38-year-old Wales excelled as a futures and options trader in Chicago, far from the one-room schoolhouse he attended as a child in Huntsville, Ala. It was there that he