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A BRECHTIAN MEDIA DESIGN ANNEMIEKE VAN DER HOEK'S EPICPEDIA

FLORIAN CRAMER



Figure 1: Epicpedia screenshot

Wikipedia's current crisis and stagnation is the latest in a history of disappointed hopes in collaborative media: from hypertext and hyperfiction to Pierre Levy's 'collective intelligence', peer-to-peer networks, Creative Commons, blogs, and wikis. Jeanette Hofmann describes their dynamics as cycles of emancipation and regulation, idealistic beginnings and disappointment. But sometimes, even the utopian premises have never been what they are commonly believed to be. Hopes that Wikipedia will stimulate young people to criticize neoliberal economics – to paraphrase Gérard Wormser – clash with the fact that the Wikipedia project was historically founded on the extreme neoliberal philosophy of Ayn Rand. Jutta Haider's and Olof Sudin's reading of Wikipedia as a 'space, justifiably called a heterotopia',¹ echoes ill-fated 1990s attempts to claim hypertext for postmodern theory² and lacks firsthand knowledge of Wikipedia's editorial politics.³

1. Jutta Haider and Olof Sudin, 'Beyond the Legacy of the Enlightenment? Online Encyclopedias as Digital Heterotopias', *First Monday*, vol. 15, no. 1, January 2010, <http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2744/2428>.
2. Such as in George Landow, *Hypertext*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992.
3. Haider's and Sudin's claim that 'hierarchies within Wikipedia are comparatively flat' being the proof in the pudding.



Figure 2: Epicpedia screenshot

Rand's 'objectivism' provides the epistemological foundation of Wikipedia's open-participation authorship under a 'neutral point of view'. More than just a personal philosophical point of departure for the project's founders, Wales and Sanger, the idea of a world that can be generically described works as an implicit social contract binding together Wikipedia's editing community. It closely matches the implicit social contracts of open source development projects of providing generic, standardized technology (such as Unix-compatible operating systems, web, and SQL database servers) freely to the masses while historically contradicting Diderot and d'Alembert's encyclopedia with its partisan politics of knowledge.

In other words, from a critical point of view, Wikipedia was perhaps idealistic but never ideal, whether in its beginnings or today. But who says that a critical point of view is purely a matter of how texts are written? As early as 2008, Rotterdam-based media designer Annemieke van der Hoek saw Wikipedia's issues as web design issues, too. Not only does a 'neutral', generic page design correspond to the 'neutral point of view'. Worst of all, the collaborative authorship of articles is not visible by default. In what could be called objectivism translated into design, the contributions of the single editors are unified into one anonymous, pseudo-univocal whole. This design, with its 1990s wiki legacy, reflects its typical uses of wikis, such as for collaboratively authored technology documentation sites.⁴ If the design and content issues of Wikipedia could be condensed to one statement, then perhaps that – in the problematic tradition of cybernetics – it treats information and human knowledge as a technical issue.

4. A good example is the Super 8 wiki, a community self-help page with technical reference information on Super 8 cameras, <http://super8wiki.com>.

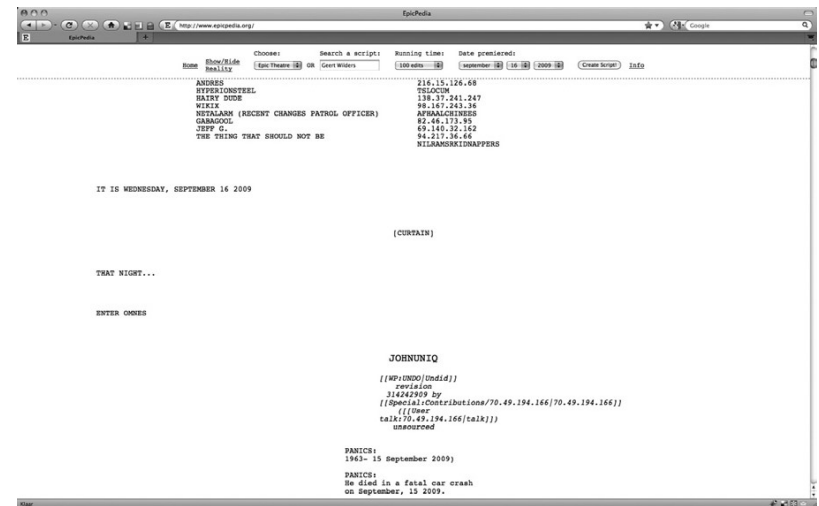


Figure 3: Epicpedia screenshot

Van der Hoek's Epicpedia (www.epicpedia.org) provides an alternative interface design for Wikipedia that literally turns it inside out. Instead of displaying articles as smoothly formatted pages with no visible traces of their different writers, Epicpedia formats each page as a dramatization of its editing history. If one clicks the button 'Show / Hide Reality', Wikipedia's default design is swapped with one that mimics the typography of written theater plays: The various editors of an article are listed as characters and ensemble, each new revision date is a new act or scene, the revisions themselves are dramatic dialogue (see screenshots). While the 'neutral point of view' of the standard Wikipedia seeks to smooth out and hide conflicts, Epicpedia's use of theater play typography as a user interface emphasizes them. On its technical side, van der Hoek's work – completed as a graduation project in the Master Media Design of the Piet Zwart Institute in Rotterdam – does not consist of manual reformatting of Wikipedia articles into dramatic texts, but is a real web application, a computer program that automatically reformats Wikipedia into drama in real time. As a result, the complete current Wikipedia can be read in (or as) Epicpedia, with the drama of each Epicpedia article adapting to the last revisions of Wikipedia.

The simple act of translating one medium into another – i.e., the encyclopedia into the drama of its own making – the mere design of the pages gives readers a critical point of view that the original Wikipedia lacks. It is a powerful counter-example to common beliefs that design is merely about making things pretty, desirable, or accessible. Like architecture, good design really is critical reflection and implementation of ways of seeing and experiencing while imposing both possibilities and constraints. In Epicpedia's case, what would be conventionally understood as anti-accessibility actually gives access to something normally concealed.

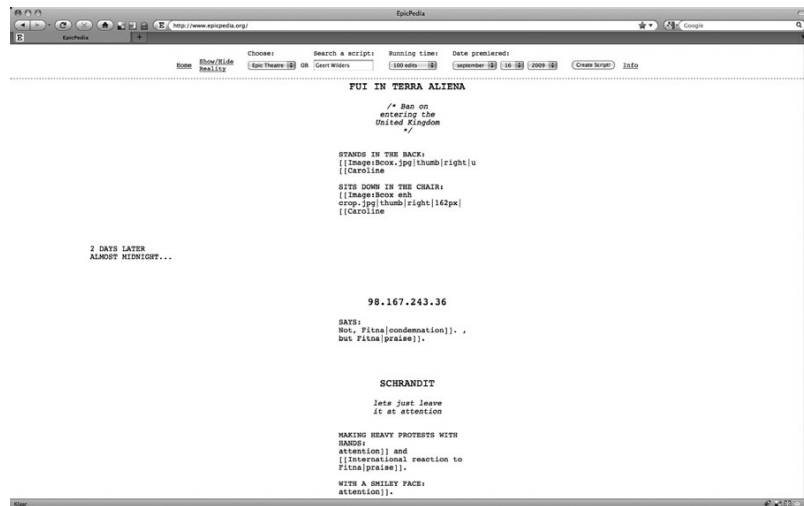


Figure 4: Epicpedia screenshot

As the name Epicpedia indicates, van der Hoek adapted this principle from the early 20th century German political playwright Bertolt Brecht and his 'epic theater'. Brecht wrote and directed theater plays in which 'estrangement' devices constantly disrupted the fourth wall, dramatic illusion: narrators on stage, anti-heroes, actors calling themselves actors, all serving the aim of making the audience reflect and think critically instead of getting immersed and identifying with the drama. Godard and Fassbinder applied Brecht's method to film. And if all of this sounds similar to Situationist tactics from billboard defacement to media pranks, this is no coincidence either. In 1957, Guy Debord wrote in his *Report on the Construction of Situations* that in 'the workers states only the experimentation carried out by Brecht in Berlin, insofar as it puts into question the classic spectacle notion, is close to the constructions that matter for us today'. The Situationist notion of the spectacle clearly corresponds to Brecht's notion of the dramatic illusion, and the disruption of the spectacle through constructed situations to his 'epic' – i.e. anti-dramatic narrative rather than acted – theater.⁵ It is an interesting twist of Epicpedia that drama and acted-out conflict conversely return as the critique of the deceptively univocal, sober epic narrative of Wikipedia's prose. And while Brecht was still indebted to Friedrich Schiller's late 18th century program of the theater as a means of political education (and revolution), with the switch flipped from emotional mimesis and catharsis to an almost impersonal criticality, the criticality of Epicpedia lies in disclosing how knowledge and learning cannot be detached from personality dramas of the actors making up Wikipedia – that knowledge is never objective, but subject to and product of cultural conflict.

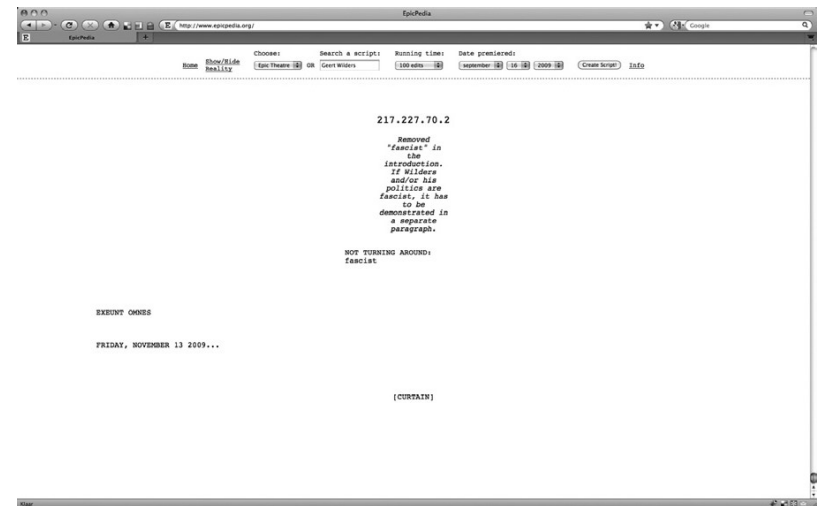


Figure 6: Epicpedia screenshot

One could also think of a non-Brechtian reading of the critical-point-of-view interface that Epicpedia provides. Making texts visible in their histories of revisions and editorial conflicts has become a core business of critical text philology. In the 1980s, the French *critique génétique* pioneered the publication of literary classics in critical editions that typographically visualized corrections, changes, and variants of texts. Since the 1990s, many philologists of this school have embraced electronic multimedia publication and computer interface design for this purpose. Epicpedia could equally be read as a *critique génétique* of Wikipedia.

Either way, Annemieke van der Hoek's project is a wake-up call to Wikipedia's makers. The blindness of today's arguably most advanced collaborative-hypertext-collective intelligence-open source-creative commons-Web 2.0-community media project to critical issues of internet media design is, give or take objectivism, astonishing. If, in Schiller's and Brecht's tradition, Epicpedia has to offer some morality at the end of the play, then it is perhaps that the current drama of Wikipedia might be less dramatic if the project would consider its own internal dramas as assets, rather than liabilities to conceal.

5. Brecht's theater, Godard's and Debord's films of course manifested the very opposite of Hollywood immersive illusionism and psychological method acting.