Good morning or afternoon everyone! Glad you could make it to this unique joint conference! My name is Minh Nguyen and I'll be making a case for why sister projects have been crucial to the Wikimedia movement and could be just as important to OpenStreetMap as the project matures.
I’m originally a Wikimedian who got addicted to Wikipedia, and then got addicted to each of its sister projects, and then got addicted to OpenStreetMap. These projects all have a lot in common, though I have to say, the OpenStreetMap community doesn’t seem as quite as interested in logo design contests as the Wikimedians.
We do have a lot in common though, like delicious cakes with amazing designs.
Like me, about half of you are addicted to editing Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.
These days, Wikipedia is synonymous with encyclopedias, but at one point we had to remind people that Wikipedia isn’t a traditional paper encyclopedia. We don’t have to worry about how many trees we’re cutting down to write about long-forgotten pop songs and random parks in Kansas. We’re building the sum of all human knowledge!
This is the thinking that led to articles about every Pokémon that ever evolved.
Inevitably, there was a backlash as the community encountered so many things that just don't belong in a respectable encyclopedia.
We developed intricate guidelines on what's notable enough to get an article. By now, there's probably a university that offers classes in navigating Wikipedia's notability guidelines.
There has always been a tension between inclusionism and deletionism. Wikipedia editors have to pick a side constantly. Keep or delete? Keep or delete?
These endless debates directly led to some of the first sister projects based on Wikipedia's technology and culture, like Wiktionary, which is today an important resource for linguists.
How did the inclusion debates lead to these projects? Consider the Wikipedia article on yak shaving. This article got nominated for deletion three times because some Wikipedians felt it was just a dictionary entry, and ultimately it was deleted.
Instead, Wiktionary now has an entry on yak shaving with not only the definition but also the etymology, synonyms, translations, and this wonderful illustration.
Wikibooks had a similar start. Today, Wikibooks maintains a large collection of textbooks, children’s books, and cookbooks. But before this site started, people used to write articles on Wikipedia that were structured like textbooks.
Organic chemistry textbook

“Wikipedia isn’t for textbooks, such as the one you’ve created at Organic textbook. We are an encyclopedia, not a textbook.”

–Talk page message to Karl Wick

Karl Wick wrote the beginnings of a textbook on organic chemistry, but another editor quickly admonished them for misunderstanding the site's purpose. So he sent an e-mail to Wikipedia’s founders about starting Wikibooks, and the rest is history.
I often describe OpenStreetMap the way that Wikimedians describe Wikipedia’s sister projects: it’s like Wikipedia but for maps. Yes, OSM has the random parks in Kansas, individual trees in some cases, and if you’ve ever played Pokémon Go on your phone, you were using OSM data.
Since OSM isn’t a paper map, it can afford to micromap intensive detail about everything without worrying about running out of space. In 2011, Harry Wood predicted that someday we may end up mapping individual blades of grass.
That was hard to believe at the time. Just a few years earlier, OSM's coverage of North America looked like this: a barren wasteland, or a blank canvas, depending on your perspective. It was a Wild West where we could experiment with new approaches to filling in the map.
So we imported a seemingly comprehensive database of roads from the U.S. Census Bureau and it was awesome. It was this basic data that encouraged folks like me to even consider contributing to the map.
But we quickly discovered that quantity does not equal quality. This is a very tame example of what the Census Bureau’s TIGER dataset contained. The roads just don’t line up at all.
Based on this and many other imports that people carried out in those days, the OSM community developed a stringent process for approving further imports. A lot of proposed imports never took place. It took a lot of energy.
Sound familiar? It's just one way in which the inclusion/deletion debate plays out in OSM.
A parallel project, OpenAddresses, began with a goal of aggregating public address databases that could be used in conjunction with OSM data, but not integrated with OSM. Today it boasts over 578 million addresses worldwide.
OpenAddresses

“The import process for OSM is tedious, long, and a negative experience that I didn’t want to go through with every municipality in the country.”

–Ian Dees

These addresses would not have been available to the broader ecosystem of software had the project’s founders tried to work within OSM’s increasingly rigid system.
Aside from automated imports, another point of contention over the years has been historical railroads, including abandoned railroads. Some mappers go through great lengths to discover and map the traces of old railroads that they find in the field. And it’s great – we love it when people document the real world so rigorously.
But in a quest for completeness, this also means mapping some things that no longer exist – a big no-no for the project in general.
Enter OpenHistoricalMap. OHM is the OpenStreetMap of history, a map of the world as it was in years past. For example, what you see here is the internal boundaries of the Inca empire.
OpenHistoricalMap

“OpenStreetMap’s debates about including or deleting historical data were going on forever, so the obvious way forward was to create OpenHistoricalMap.”

—Richard Welty

OHM’s founders had essentially the same motivation as OpenAddresses’ founders. Debates about whether to include former railroads and other history kept going in circles, escalating into heated debates. A new project could escape this cycle.
Except it meant starting from scratch, all over again.
Starting over is really hard. You all know the feeling of having spent lots of time writing something, only for a computer crash to leave you with a blank page. How could we get people interested in building something so much more ambitious than OSM?
The answer is to focus on the stories that people want to tell the most and work out from there. Here, a university cartography class uploaded comprehensive Utah railroad history to OHM.
Here, OHM shows San José's intricate, constantly shifting boundaries. Prominent features like roads, rivers, and boundaries help users to orient themselves and establish a framework for mappers to build out from.
But before we can get to this future, we need to address the biggest pain points of working between OSM and OHM today. For several reasons, not all of them technical, it's too hard to take something in OSM into OHM. Wikimedia has solved this problem multiple times. In Wiktionary's early years, the transwiki process made it easy to ask a bot to transfer a Wikipedia article to Wiktionary, taking care of tedious steps like preserving revision history. Today, Wikipedia users frequently transfer appropriately licensed images to Commons with just a few clicks.
We need a similar workflow for OHM because many of us have been hoarding history in OSM. Before I got into OHM mapping, I often tried to preserve historical data in OSM. If a shop closed, I would change its tags to say what it used to be rather than deleting it outright. But now these qualified tags are cluttering up OSM and have no use there. Many mappers find themselves in this situation but don’t have a convenient way to transfer their own work to a new site.
On a technical level, OSM can support OHM by generalizing its core software. OHM runs on forks of each of OSM’s software components. These components were never designed for a site other than OSM, no matter how similar to OSM. Until recently, OHM greeted Spanish speakers with “Bienvenido a OpenStreetMap” instead of “Bienvenido a OpenHistoricalMap.”
By contrast, MediaWiki developers have gone through great lengths to use generic terminology and insert the site name into dynamic placeholders.
Institutional support

- Shared discussion spaces
- Joint conferences and mapathons
- Formal affiliations (local chapters)

Beyond technical support, what sister projects really need is institutional support. This can take many forms. For example, OSM can open up its usual discussion spaces so that mappers can talk about sister projects on an even playing field. The projects can coordinate through joint conferences, like the one you’re attending, and mapathons where mappers can share ideas. Most importantly, there needs to be some kind of formal affiliation, such as through local chapters, so that contributors can trust that the project is serious and will be long-lived.
If we get this right, then everybody wins. Sister projects expand free culture, creating new forms of content and attracting contributors who never would’ve been interested in the original project. They can offer an outlet for problematic users to focus on their actual interests instead of bending the rules and generating conflict. New forms of open data can increase our relevance in offline settings like government and academia. As I mentioned, sister projects force the software to accommodate new communities in small and large ways. And if we allow ourselves to be creative, then we can transcend old rivalries. Google Maps may be the one to beat, but they certainly aren’t thinking about historical data like we are.
Finally, in the course of putting together this presentation, I had to do a bit of yak shaving myself. I put together this graph of my contributions to various Wikimedia projects and OSM over the years. You can see how OSM really took over my free time once I discovered it. But then look at what happened a few years ago: as it became possible to integrate Wikidata with OSM, OSM gave me so many more reasons to contribute to Wikidata. These projects have reinforced each other in my personal experience. I hope this will be your experience too.
Let's grow this family of projects, and let's design some awesome logos.
Thank you so much for attending this conference! If you have any questions about what you’ve seen here, here's how to contact me. Stick around today to hear more from a great lineup of speakers. Thanks again!