For the price of 15 cups of coffee a day

Thoughts on Enterprise MediaWiki sustainability

Yaron Koren | EMWCon Spring 2023 | April 19

About me

- Live in New Jersey, U.S.

- Enterprise MediaWiki developer, consultant, evangelist

- WikiWorks, *Working with MediaWiki*, *Between the Brackets*, Canasta

We are very lucky

- We use software, MediaWiki, that is open source but requires no effort on our part to keep going.

- MediaWiki is maintained (very well) by the Wikimedia Foundation and a large group of motivated volunteers.

What about extensions and skins?

There are basically four groups:

- Maintained by the Wikimedia Foundation, or WMDE (VisualEditor, Scribunto, Wikibase)

- Maintained by a company (Semantic MediaWiki (?), SocialProfile, WSOAuth)

- Maintained by one or more individuals (most of them)

- Not maintained

There are gray areas here, of course.

Extensions in *all* of these groups are at risk.

See, for example: LiquidThreads and Flow/StructuredDiscussions - both created by the WMF to structure talk page discussions.

- If you installed LQT on your wiki, you are out of luck!

- If you installed SD, you may be out of luck in the future. (Maintenance-only since 2015.)

What about extensions maintained by MediaWiki consulting companies/wiki farms?

These may be the safest - though still at risk.

Also, "maintained" does not mean that new features are getting added.

See:

- SMW: no new features since 2020?
- SocialProfile: still lacks an extension.json file

The good news

"Zombie" extensions can live a long time, if they are hosted on Wikimedia's Git repository.

- If keeping an extension working just involves staying up-to-date with changes to MediaWiki hooks, functions, etc., there is a small group of devs and volunteers who continuously make these fixes across all extensions.

- (Also true for skins? I don't know.)

The bad news

Most extensions and skins need more than find-and-replace-style maintenance.

The bus number/"bus factor"

It's real!

Anyone remember these ads?

(This one doesn't mention coffee… but I recall some of the ads/commercials saying "for the price of one cup of coffee a day…")

Some math

- Nowadays, a cup of coffee in the U.S. costs an average of ~ $3

- Fifteen cups a day, over an entire year = $3 * 15 * 365 = $16,425

- I believe that, for even just this amount of money, the so-called Enterprise MediaWiki ecosystem can be made self-sustaining!

What can be done with $16,425?

Google Summer of Code

- A program, run by Google, that matches open-source newcomers (no longer just college students!) with open-source software orgs, and funds their development projects for the summer.

- Started in 2005; the Wikimedia Foundation has participated every year since 2006.

Benefits of Google Summer of Code

- Introduces ~~students~~ newcomers to open-source software and specific orgs

- Free labor for open-source software projects

- **Identifies people who can later be hired**

Notable former GSoC students: Jeroen De Dauw, Nischay Nahata.

What do GSoC participants have in common?

- Talented (since they were selected out of a group of candidates)

- Interested in contributing to open source

- Interested in MediaWiki

- Usually affordable!

How to collect/distribute the money?

- Best option: an organization/consortium/foundation, similar in concept to the Linux Foundation, Document Foundation, etc.

- Ideally, one's "vote" is tied as directly as possible to the size of one's financial contribution

My previous attempt at this

- The "Enterprise MediaWiki Consortium"

- One reason it failed: the Wikimedia Foundation doesn't want the word "MediaWiki" to be used for money-related purposes.

New idea:
"Canasta Foundation"

Canasta

- A Docker-based framework for MediaWiki (https://canasta.wiki)

- Meant to be universal, flexible

- Currently includes ~150 extensions, ~10 skins

- Provides a rough guarantee that all the software it bundles together will work

Why "Canasta Foundation"?

- Solves the naming problem

- Canasta is actually (in my opinion) an ideal "framework" for making Enterprise MediaWiki-related decisions

- Can accomodate a community-based decision-making process

- The set of extensions and skins within Canasta provides an easy demarcation of the Canasta Foundation's "domain"

- Note: you don't have to use Canasta to be involved (though I think everyone should!)

Case study: WatchAnalytics extension

- Created by James Montalvo and Kris Field of NASA in 2015

- Development ended around 2020

- Overhauled by WikiWorks intern Sanjay Thiyagarajan in 2022 and 2023 (including a move to Wikimedia's Git repo) **to enable inclusion in Canasta**

- Code is now in much better shape, including extensive i18n

Why not Open CSP?

- Open CSP is very tied in to one company (Wikibase Solutions) and its extensions; it's not something that could really be controlled/adopted by a community.

- (Same is true for Hallo Welt's BlueSpice.)

What about MediaWiki Stakeholders' Group?

- Simply a different approach - MWStake is democratic, while a "Canasta Foundation" would be essentially "oligarchic".

- Also, MWStake is not chiefly focused on extension and skin maintenance

- However, MWStake could make sense as the ones who hold the bank account

Could this lead to a "hostile takeover"?

- Company ExtremeWikis pays in $20,000 a year

- Get more than 50% of the vote

- They vote to remove the extensions they don't like, and add in all of their own extensions

This fear is overblown

- Voting would be more about how funding gets allocated, not the overall direction

- Many open-source organizations provide a model for decision-making process

- That said: money talks! Putting in money is a good way to get your voice heard.

So, what's next?

That's up to you.

Thoughts?