

Making the ConT_EXt wiki easier to improve

Abstract

An effort is underway to encourage both reading and editing of the ConT_EXt wiki. This article names nine concrete improvements that are part of this effort, and makes a case for each of them. These nine items are the following. To impose structure and to ease navigation: predictable article names; navboxes; and a simple Main Page. To coordinate efforts: a ‘How this wiki works’ page; a village pump; and templates for flagging problems. To make things easy for our editors: templates for common things; template documentation; sandboxes and testcases for templates.

Keywords

documentation, projects, wiki, infrastructure, ConT_EXt

Introduction

The ConT_EXt wiki, eight years old already, is still not what it should be: people on the mailing list often say that they checked it and came away disappointed or confused, or even that they have stopped checking it at all. Not many people edit the wiki, either: the lack of structure makes it hard to know where to put things, and the tools to instruct and coordinate are also lacking.

MAPS articles usually involve TeX code, but this one does not — this article is about the current effort to make the ConT_EXt wiki an editor-friendly and reader-friendly place. It is not about what we want, but about what we are doing: the specific things we are implementing on the wiki to bring it back to health. This article will hopefully be useful to other projects setting up their own wikis, and inspiring to ConT_EXt users who want to get involved in shaping the wiki.

A very short introduction for those with other wikis: a **wiki** is a collection of articles that anybody can edit, like Wikipedia. The idea is that the barrier to helping out is as low as humanly possible. Linking to other articles is done by typing `[[Article title]]`; this is called a **wikilink**. A **template** is a page containing text that can be reused on many other pages; you transclude the template `X` by typing `{{X}}`. Templates can take **template parameters**: on the ConT_EXt wiki, for example, a link to the reference page of `\starttext` is produced with `{{cmd|starttext}}`.

Nine things every wiki should have

To impose structure and to ease navigation:

1. Predictable article names
2. Navboxes
3. A simple Main Page

To coordinate efforts:

4. A ‘How this wiki works’ page
5. A Village Pump
6. Templates for flagging problems

To make things easy for our editors:

7. Templates for common things
8. Template documentation
9. Sandboxes and testcases for templates

Structure and navigation: Predictable article names

Being able to guess article names is good for users: they can go straight to where they need to be, they know what to expect when they get there, and it gives them a pleasant feeling of knowing where things are.

Being able to guess article names is even better for editors. This section could also be called ‘A place for everything, and everything in its place’: knowing the proper page names is the same as knowing where to put things. Especially while a wiki is not yet mature it is vital that editors can instantly add information to the right page, and it is vital that they know when to start a new article and what to call it.

What if the article titles on a wiki are not systematic, and it is not always clear what goes where, like on the ConT_EXt wiki? If a user knows something and wants to add it to the wiki, here are some things that could happen — these are all things I have done myself.

- They could find themselves investing five minutes in assessing what article pages already exist on the topic, which is time they should not need to invest.
- They might have to start a new page and fret for a while on what to call it, because the seven similar pages employ four different naming conventions.

- They could just put their contribution at the end of an existing article and be done with it, thus making that article even more of a hodge-podge than it already was.
- They might remember the effort they had to make the last few times, and end up not making the edit after all.

For the ConT_EXt wiki, we will soon have a discussion on what article name patterns we need. On the topic of columns, for example, we will need to describe both the ‘columns’ mechanism and the ‘columnset’ mechanism, compare them, document their commands, have a place to put examples, and list relevant example documents. For an example of how to call the various articles, see the navbox in the next section.

Structure and navigation: Navboxes

Columns	
General overview	Columns
Mechanisms	Columns (mechanism) · Paragraphs (mechanism) · Columnset
	Columns setupcolumns · startcolumns · column
Commands	Paragraphs defineparagraphs · setupparagraphs · startparagraph · paragraph
	Columnsets definecolumnset · setupcolumnsetlines · setupcolumnsetstart · startcolumnset
Examples	Column examples · Columnset examples · Two-column magazine style · Asymmetric column style

This is a navbox, or navigation box¹. It is a fantastically good way to (1) provide an overview of articles available on a topic; (2) highlight gaps and double entries; (3) highlight inconsistent article naming; (4) instantly make a new article reachable from many other pages. If there is anything more useful to structure a wiki, I don’t know what it is. Every wiki should have a navbox template, and I don’t understand why MediaWiki doesn’t include one in the main distribution.

Structure and navigation: A simple Main Page

When it comes to the Main Page, project wikis are different from Wikipedia². Especially when the wiki is the website of the (open source) project, as well as its documentation: Wikipedia’s main page fires a hundred impressions at you at once, but project websites should not. This is a guess at the most common reasons for visiting an open source project’s wiki/website:

- To learn about the program or project in general
- To look up an answer to a usage question
- To join the project’s development community
- To learn about improving the wiki

A simple and attractive main page gives readers confidence that they will find their answer. The ConT_EXt wiki’s main page’s current eighty-odd links inspire fear of getting lost, instead.

Coordinating efforts: A ‘How this wiki works’ page

People can’t do what they don’t know, and they can’t know what they can’t discover, so we need to write our guidelines down. Explain how the pieces of the wiki work, and how articles are named and structured, and how we’d like pages to look: that will make it easy to get new editors started, and it will give them confidence in their edits. This may turn into multiple pages, of course, and it probably will.

Coordinating efforts: A Village Pump

The village pump is the ‘Welcome to this wiki’ page for editors. It points to the FAQ. It points to the ‘How this wiki works’ page. It points to the pages of the various wikiprojects, and on a small wiki it may mention which one has priority. It has a place for people to ask questions, and to make proposals and discuss plans. No wiki should be without.

The project pages will be located in the same namespace as the village pump; this namespace is generally named after the wiki it is on, and used for issues concerning (parts of) the wiki in general. On Wikipedia the namespaces is Wikipedia and the village pump is located at Wikipedia:Village Pump³; the equivalent location on the ConT_EXt wiki would be Context wiki:Village Pump⁴.

‘Village Pump’ may seem a slightly odd name; it is the name of the main forum of the English-language Wikipedia. You may know the Village Pump by another name on your own language’s Wikipedia project: it is called *De Kroeg* on the Dutch site, *Le Bistro* on the French site, *La Caf e* on the Spanish site, and *Fragen zur Wikipedia* on the German Wikipedia.

Lastly: is a village pump better than a mailing list? It is. Unlike the mailing list, it is located on the wiki. Imagine browsing the wiki and stumbling across a link to a mailing list; conversely, imagine stumbling across an actual discussion that you can instantly contribute to. Which is the more compelling? Which one is easier to contribute to, especially if one was editing the wiki anyway?

1. Navboxes on Wikipedia: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Template:navbox>

Navboxes on the ConT_EXt wiki: <http://wiki.contextgarden.net/Template:navbox>

2. Main pages: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page; http://wiki.contextgarden.net/Main_Page;

3. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Village_Pump;

4. http://wiki.contextgarden.net/Context_wiki:Village_Pump;

Coordinating efforts: Templates for flagging problems

Wikis always take a while to settle in, and pages will end up needing attention that doesn't boil down to 'It's empty. Somebody should write something here'. When people come across such problems and don't have time to fix them right away, they should have a template they can slap on that will mark the problem. Templates for the following, at least, should be at hand:

- This page X should be **split** into two articles, X and Y.
- This page should be **merged** with page X.
- This page should be **moved** to page X.
- The information on this page needs to be **checked** for accuracy.
- The writing or formatting does not conform to this wiki's **style**.
- A generic TODO template that shows a description of the problem.

Sometimes the template adds a box to the page to warn or inform the reader; nearly always the template adds the page to a category like Pages to split. These categories make sure the problems are not forgotten, and also serve as a source of simple tasks.

Easing improvement: Templates for common things

Make typing easy. How many typing aid templates you can add for general usage depends on your project; the ConTeXt wiki has templates for linking to command pages and to source files. In addition, it has typing-aid templates that are used when documenting the wiki itself: `{{tag|b}}` is easier to write than `<code><nowiki>...</nowiki></code>`; and for linking to, for example, `Template:navbox`, `{{tl|navbox}}` is hard to beat.

These are the templates that should at least be available for documenting one's wiki, because typing their result requires mucking about with `<code>` and/or `<nowiki>` tags: `{{tag}}`⁵ to produce HTML tags; `{{tlx}}`⁶ to type template names with parameters; and `{{para}}`⁷ to type parameters alone. A

template for box templates is also good; consider stealing `{{ambox}}`⁸ from Wikipedia.

Easing improvement: Template documentation

Document your wiki's templates! You really want to, especially because the MediaWiki template syntax is so hard to read. In this case, the Dutch Wikipedia's system is better than that of the English Wikipedia: `{{Sjablooninfo}}`⁹ is a very short and simple template that puts its contents in a yellow box.

The English Wikipedia's template documentation system is massively over-engineered compared to the Dutch one: it involves separate `/doc` subpages, the templates `{{documentation}}` and `{{documentation subpage}}`, and close to a dozen sub-templates¹⁰. Unfortunately, that is the system the ConTeXt wiki now uses, because it was transferred by the author of this article before he discovered the simpler system. Changing over to the Dutch system is still very tempting, and may yet happen.

Easing improvement: Sandboxes and testcases for templates

We want our templates to be improvable, yes? Then we need a way to make that improvement risk-free. So, we place a testing version of our template X at `X/sandbox`, and have `X/testcases` display various examples of `{{X|...}}` and `{{X/sandbox|...}}` side-by-side. Proposed changes can be made and tweaked and improved in the sandbox first. Once the editor has a final version, they can move that to the template page. This way, they can be confident of getting it right the first time.

In conclusion

By the time you are reading this, the ConTeXt wiki will not be perfect yet — but it will have become easy to improve. Come and have a look, visit the village pump, and see if you like the new direction. Give thanks to Patrick Gundlach, who originally created the wiki; and to Taco, who is its sysadmin. Help out if you spot something fun, and by all means kibitz. The wiki is getting better every weeki.

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5. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Template:tag>

6. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Template:tls>

7. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Template:para>

8. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Template:ambox>

9. <http://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sjabloon:Sjablooninfo>

10. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Template:documentation> and [Template:documentation subpage](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Template:documentation_subpage). For the subtemplates, edit [Template:documentation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Template:documentation) and look under the 'Templates included on this page' heading at the bottom.