Treasure Tables

Using a GMing Wiki: It Slices, It Dices

Using a GMing Wiki: It Slices, It Dices collects three Treasure Tables guest posts on the topic of using a wiki as a GMing tool. (And like our first PDF, it's 100% free.) Online or offline, wikis can be very useful for GMs — as you're about to find out!

The first section, Wikis for GMs: An Overview, was written by John Arcadian of Silvervine Games. The second section, TiddlyWiki as a GMing Tool, was written by Amy Vander Vorste. John's article covers wikis in general, from technical basics to implementation, while Amy's article discusses a particular flavor of online wiki, TiddlyWiki, that's quite handy for GMs.

WIKIS FOR GMS: AN OVERVIEW

There are a lot of great ways that GMs can use wikis. Here are just a few examples:

• You can use a wiki as a campaign chronicle, and keep logs and records of all of your players' journeys.

• If you are creating your own world and want to give your characters detailed access to background information, you can tailor your wiki for worldbuilding.

• You can use your wiki to keep your GMing notes and have quick access to them from any computer.

With the proper use of groups, passwords and detailed links, you can even use one wiki for all of these purposes.

There are lots of other uses for your wiki, too, like handling NPCS (providing information to the players, keeping track of NPC movements and information), places (detailed information, maps, encounters), characters (GMs can keep track of them, players can access information about each other), plots (plot hooks, possible encounters) and enemies (detailed information, random encounter tables).

However you decide to use your wiki, though, there are a few things which should be kept in mind. (Most wikis use similar markup syntax, but my experience is mainly with PMwiki. Certain referencs will only be valid within the PMwiki format, but I'll try to stick to general guidlines for use with other wikis.)

BASICS

When first installed, most wikis are set up with a standard left sidebar setup with content in frames to the right. There is no need to change this as it is one of the best ways to organize information. The left sidebar can be used as a starting place for your group links. By editing the links here, you can have links to the head pages of each group or category that you create, and include sub-links to major topics.

If you want to change the format, however, most wikis include a template file which organizes the way that information is stored. Editing this requires a decent grasp of HTML and CSS as well as backup files. Always back up the template before editing it! *Always*.

If you want to give your wiki a personal touch, changing the logo is one very easy change that you can make. Changing the logo is as easy as pointing the link to a new image. You can also download skin files for most wikis to change their colors and layout.

While wikis don't use HTML and it's easy to edit content, making changes to the design or adding in special features (like a search box, for instance) requires a bit more knowledge. The best place to start when you want to expand your wiki knowledge is by going through the master markup index and basic editing guides.

The master markup index should hold all of the information about what commands the wiki understands. Here you should find every command that the wiki will understand, and be able to copy them into your own wiki.

If you want to change the title of a page, you'll find the (:title text:) command here. If you want to add a search box, you'll find (:searchbox group=Group size=size label=label:) here as well. If you want to list all the pages in a group, you can put together a longer command like this one: (:pagelist incl -excl group=abc fmt=def list=ghi order=jkl:).

The basic editing guide will not give you as much advanced information, but it will tell you how to change the basic style of the text, links and images. In general, this is all you'll need, but invariably advanced users will want to go mucking through the code.

LINKS

In order to keep a wiki well organized, it might be necessary to make use of detailed links. While it is possibe to merely enclose a word in [[ ]] brackets and create a link to a new page, it is also possible to define the link text and set the link location.

You can use a detailed link to denote a group, to change the name of a page or to point to an outside location. You can also use special markup to cause links to open in specific places. For example:

[[http://www.treasuretables.org | TreasureTables]]
[[npcs.tensero | Tensero]]
%newwin% [[http://www.treasuretables.org | TreasureTables]]

This is a more advanced technique, though – a link of [[Tensero]] is not the same as [[npcs.tensero | Tensero]].

Now that we've covered the basics of setting up your first campaign wiki, let's look at some of the things that really set wikis apart as GMing tools.

GROUPS AND TAGS

Groups and tags are essential to organizing and separating the information that you store in your wiki. For example, you can create a group for all of your NPCs and an individual page for each NPC. The main group list would act as a list of NPC names, but clicking on the name of an NPC would also allow you to add detailed information and images to that entry.

This will also let your players update that NPC information with things they learn – or suspect – about individual NPCs. You may create Tensero the street juggler as a throwaway NPC, and give him a wiki entry just to share a single piece of information – but when one of your players updates his blurb with "Tensero seems to be connected to the royal family in some way," you have a whole new plot hook which already works with your players' suspicions.

You should be able to create groups merely by including more detailed information in the link – [[npcs.tensero | Tensero]], for example – or by adding an "NPCs" tag to the entry.

PASSWORDS

If you're using your wiki (or parts of it) for GM-only information, or if you'd prefer to not let the outside world see your campaign information, you can set passwords for editing and/or reading the wiki.

You can set passwords by page, by group or for the entire site. Setting passwords for the entire site requires some minor editing of configuration files. Remember to always have a backup!

You might want to create groups of pages and password protect them based on what you want your players to have access to. Like this:

NPCs: Open access (anyone can read and edit this section)
Plots: Read and write password (editing and reading are both password protected)
Enemies: Read and write password
Places: Open access
Stores and Items: Write password (anyone can read it; only someone with the password can edit it)

HISTORY

If you do leave areas open without passwords, there is always the possibility that someone may change information which you would rather not have changed. One of the best features of wikis is the ability to instantly revert to an old page if the information gets changed. By clicking on the History link on most wiki pages, you can go back through each change and restore and older version.

If a player posts information you don't want accessible to everyone, or you realize you wrote over something that you desperately needed, you can always reverse the last few changes and repair the entry. Each change can also be logged by author.

With some editing of your wiki's configuration, you can also require people to sign their names to the changes and keep track of who edited what.

PLUGINS/RECIPES

While most of the information covered so far has been about basic uses of wikis, there are a lot of advanced features you can include with the right plugins/recipes.

A plugin or recipe will usually be a PHP script that allows the wiki to parse extra information or add extra elements. The larger the design team or scope of your wiki, the more plugins/recipes will be available.

For our wiki we use:

RSS Feed Displayers
RSS Feeds
INCLUDE HTML PAGES
GEMINI SKIN
Blog Simple
Rich Edit
Spell Checker
Image Map

…and may use many others as our needs change.

One of the best uses for plugins we have found is to include the deadjournal pages for our developer journals. It drops the entire HTML page inside of the wiki content box.

You can also include HTML with some plugins and gain added functionality. This does, however, open up opportunities for people to hit your wiki with viruses if you don't take proper security measures.

We also use image map to link areas on our world map to descriptions of towns and other features located in those areas, and we make new pages with a blogging plugin – and send them to an RSS feed with the feed plugins. These operations are a bit more advanced, but they're really little more than adding lines to the configuration file and including the premade script in your scripts directory.

Out-of-Game Information

The final thing I'll say regarding wiki use for gaming is that if you're going to use a wiki to keep track of your campaign, you may encounter problems with out-of-game information.

If you make the wiki available to your players, they become more informed and involved in the game – which is a good thing. They also have access to a lot of information their characters may or may not have, though. If a player posts information about his character's past which he never tells to anyone in-game, and other players make use of it, then sticky situations can result.

While most gamers are invested in the game and in maintaining its integrity, bad apples can utilize the wiki to their own ends, possibly taking advantage of loopholes in the programming to get to detailed plot information. So to echo the advice given on most wiki download sites, "Make sure you use any security tools provided."

Outside of that, wikis are incredible and versa-tile new tools for player interaction, campaign management and worldbuilding.

TiddlyWiki as a GMing Tool

I tinkered with several wiki programs when I redid my gaming group's campaign glossary. I finally settled on TiddlyWiki, a JavaScript self-contained wiki. It's extremely simple to use – no setup needed.

TiddlyWiki (or just TW) isn't a multi-user-editable, server-side wiki (like MediaWiki). It's meant to exist on your own computer and be edited, with the option of putting it onto the web. (Side note: There are versions of TW that will allow for server-side, mult-user editing: ZiddlyWiki and RoWiki. But I don't have experience with those.)

For my first time as a GM, I used it solely as my session planning notes (printed onto index cards, using "print selection"). Slick!

• I liked the non-linear, blog-like approach. My brain had so many things swirling around – I needed a place to write them down and organize them.

• Just adding [[ ]] around a WikiWord makes it a hyperlink. Very useful, because it's type-as-you-go. No extra mouse clicks. I added links for items I wanted to fill in later. Easy to find, too. (Look in "More"->"Missing" or look for links that are italicized).

For example: One of my plot items is, "The twins need a rare herb Oede for the patient who has a dreaded Illness. They need someone to find it or accompany them while they search for it." I was able to easily find the links that needed info and fill in details for Oede and the Illness, so I had references for them.

• I prefer the ability to reprint, rather than rewrite an index card. (After college, my handwriting was almost illegible – even to me! There are days I stare at my grocery list in the middle of the store wondering what I meant by a particular chicken scratch…)

• Tags help my short memory. If I can't remember the name of an NPC, I search through the place names and NPC tags (right-hand side, "Tags" tab).

• With the checkbox plug-in, I made a to-do list and a plot check list for what I had to complete before I was ready to GM the session.

If you're interested in learning more, here are a few other links for TW that I've found useful:

• TW help/start: Main Features, TW Tips
• Addons/plug-ins and help: Plug-Ins, TW Google Group, and the TW Development Google Group

(My favorite plug ins are: toggleTag, CheckboxPlugin, UntaggedListHandler and NewFromTemplateMacro)

FEATURED LINKS

In case you're reading this offline, here are all of the links mentioned in this PDF (in alphabetical order).

Amy Vander Vorste
www.kitsunetachi.com

Don Mappin
www.donmappin.com

MediaWiki
www.mediawiki.org/wiki/MediaWiki

PMwiki
www.pmwiki.org

RoWiki
rodney.gotdns.com

Silvervine Games
www.silvervinegames.com

TiddlyWiki
www.tiddlywiki.com
www.tiddlywiki.com/#MainFeatures
www.tiddlywiki.com/#Plugins
www.tiddlywiki.com/#WikiWord

TiddlyWiki Google Group
groups.google.com/group/TiddlyWiki

TiddlyWiki Development Google Group
groups.google.com/group/TiddlyWikiDev

TiddlyWiki Tips
www.tiddlywikitips.com

Treasure Tables
www.treasuretables.org

ZiddlyWiki
www.ziddlywiki.org

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Treasure Tables offers hundreds of free articles for GMs, and is updated on a daily basis. We also have friendly forums, including a board just for GMing Q&A, and a growing GMing wiki.

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