

My word, it's the Dictionary of Sydney

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It must have been difficult to know where to start, and by its very nature the project will have no definitive end, but the Dictionary of Sydney is due to go live mid-year.

The name isn't very illuminating but it's best thought of as an online historical encyclopaedia of the city's people, places and events.

This isn't a new idea — Melbourne already has a printed encyclopaedia, and like other cities including Chicago has taken its printed version online, while New Zealand's Te Ara (which translates as 'the pathway') skipped print completely and went straight to the web — but the Dictionary of Sydney has been designed to take the concept to a new level in terms of user engagement.

It was first suggested by city historian Shirley Fitzgerald, who gathered interested people together for an initial workshop four years ago as Melbourne was launching

its printed encyclopaedia. The Australian Research Council awarded a five-year grant of \$900,000, a board was created to attract further funding, and positions were advertised in 2006.

After sorting through the applications and holding interviews, the Dictionary of Sydney board appointed Stewart Wallace as project manager. Wallace had worked in IT for 20 years including a decade at City of Sydney, most recently as its applications manager, but was quick to put his hand up when this new opportunity arose.

He has a handful of editorial and multimedia staff around him, as well as more than 200 volunteer contributors made up largely of historians, writers and academics.

They have generated more than half a million words that are ready to go into the first phase of the project, with 500 entries including information about 150 of the city's 700 suburbs. There will be thousands of multimedia items, mostly photos to start with

but also including audio and video content.

Although the project will go live mid-year, Wallace is keen to stress that it's a starting point rather than the finishing line.

"The hope is to create something permanent here that can be grown and added to," he says. "It will have to get beyond research funding somewhere

It will be tightly controlled by its army of registered contributors to keep the content historically accurate.

along the way for that to happen, but at this stage we are concentrating on getting something visible out there."

How information should be organised has been a major consideration as the project progressed. Although there will be basic search functionality, Wallace and his team have created a multi-dimensional graph model that enables users to get into the material and "bounce around within it".

"We are encoding everything in time and space wherever possible and will be showing whatever we can on a map," he says. "We've identified people, places, events — it's a vast task but it gives you a model where things can be tied together."

Despite efforts to create a coherent set of topics, this proved to be an impossible task as entries kept

pouring in on all manner of subjects. This forced Wallace to embrace the random nature of the project and he now thinks this diversity will be one of the dictionary's key attractions.

In contrast to sites like Wikipedia, where members of the public can edit entries, the Dictionary of Sydney will be tightly controlled by its army of registered contributors in an attempt to keep the content historically accurate. But there will be

and it's available to all

mechanisms for people to provide information, Wallace says, because historians are well aware of how important grassroots information is and are keen to take advantage of it.

So what will people use the Dictionary of Sydney for? First and foremost, Wallace says general interest but he is also looking for ways to push out streams of information that is relevant to specific groups — these include broad audiences like secondary education and the tourism industry as well as niche organisations like sports clubs and historical societies.

Attracting interest from such groups will be essential if the Dictionary of Sydney is to have a long-term future and continue to grow as a body of information because it won't survive on research funding.

Wallace is opposed to looking for direct advertising, at least for now, because he thinks it wouldn't sit very well with the project's core aim of providing a free resource that is

available to everybody. However, he does plan to explore sponsorship opportunities once the first version goes live.

Despite working in IT for more than 20 years, Wallace says he hates the deskbound nature of PCs and is most intrigued by the possibility of taking the dictionary mobile.

"Mobile excites me because it gets information out there into the physical world," he says. "We're never going to have a building — we're not a museum or anything like that — but to the extent that we can tie our information in with what's physically out there, the city becomes a dictionary."

"At some stage I would like to look at the possibility of activating the plaques on historic buildings. We've spent a lot of time on how things are set up in the backend so that we can pursue those possibilities down the track. If it was just a matter of building a website we'd probably be there by now."