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Technology Left Behind -- Ravelry Revelry

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at **Blackwell's**. For three years the relationship held until **Basil Blackwell** dispensed with her editorial talents with a mixture of relief and reluctance, describing her employment as "like harnessing a race-horse to a plough."²⁸ Nonetheless they parted on good terms and some have even suggested, **Graham Green's** wife for example, that **DLS** immortalised **Basil Blackwell**, using him as her model for the famous detective **Lord Peter Wimsey**.

What is not in doubt is the debt writers like **DLS** owed the **Blackwells**. It is impossible to record all the women who were on **Blackwell's** lists. The record is copious and flies in the face of any criticism of **Basil**, who was sometimes accused, by those who didn't know him, of being patronising. In later life **Sir Basil** accorded his highest praise to a woman writer. In **George Eliot's** book *Middlemarch* he found: "a moment of truth" that goes "to the core of the human mind and the unalterable element in its constitution." Such a moment of truth, in **Basil's** view, was captured when **Mrs. Bulstrode**, learning that her husband's reputation was blasted by the discovery of some villainy in his early life, sought him out as he sat abjectly "feeling himself perishing in unpitied misery." Putting "one hand on his, which rested on the arm of a chair, and the other on his shoulder," she says, "Look up Nicholas!" So she espouses her husband's shame and sorrow; no more is spoken, they weep together. Singling out such a wife as **Mrs. Bulstrode** is perhaps a sign of **Sir Basil Blackwell's** profound respect for the powers of women. The **Blackwell** women, family, employees and writers were indeed warriors in the as yet unrecognised feminist battle. But they

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would never have seen themselves as such. They were devoted to the wider cause of literature:

*"Now from the grave wake poetry again,
O sacred Muses I have served so long" (II Purgatorio, I, vii-viii)*

The next episode will tell of the opening of the famous Broad Street Shop in Oxford, and the beginnings of a publishing and bookselling empire.



Technology Left Behind — Ravelry Revelry

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In **Jack Montgomery's** "Wandering the Web" column in the November 2008 issue of *Against the Grain*, **Lesley Montgomery** recommended several of her favorite knitting and crocheting Websites. I, myself, am a crocheter, and I read **Lesley's** annotated descriptions with interest and enthusiasm. **Lesley** points out many good Websites, several of which were new to me, but I couldn't help noticing that my own personal favorite knitting and crocheting Website, **Ravelry**, was absent from her list.

Actually, to call **Ravelry** (<http://www.ravelry.com/>) just a Website is misleading. **Ravelry** is an online community for knitters, crocheters, spinners, dyers, weavers, pattern designers, and all other manner of fiber artists. One of my freshman advisees describes **Ravelry** as "Facebook for knitters and crocheters," but that doesn't quite cover what **Ravelry** is or does either. It is a personal organization tool, a yarn and pattern database, and an online community all rolled into one.

In short, **Ravelry** is the single greatest thing to happen to yarnies (lovers of yarn and yarn arts) since the invention of the spinning wheel. Really. I am not exaggerating. It is just that awesome.

A Brief History of Ravelry

Ravelry is the brainchild of husband and wife team **Casey** and **Jessica Forbes**. **Jess**, known on **Ravelry** as *frecklegirl*, is a knitter. The idea for **Ravelry** grew out of **Jess's** frustration with finding concise information about knitting patterns and yarns on the Internet. The information she needed was out there, but sifting through all of the blogs, Websites, and image files available on the Web took countless hours and still often resulted in incomplete information. (<http://www.ravelry.com/about>)

Beginning in January 2007, **Jess** and **Casey** took on the task of creating an online community specifically designed to cater to the needs of knitters and crocheters, a place where fiber lovers could connect with each other; organize their projects, stash and tools; and have access to an ever growing database of pattern and yarn information. (<http://www.ravelry.com/about>) "Jesse and I worked pretty closely at the beginning on design decisions and such. Now we are all so busy that we do our own thing more often,"

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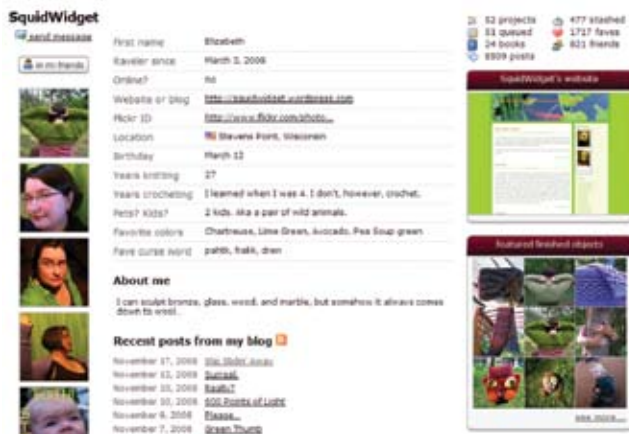


Figure 1. Profile Page

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says Casey, who is a programmer. Casey has single-handedly crafted **Ravelry** using **Ruby**, a new programming language, the **Rails** framework, and a **MySQL** database. (For more information on **Ruby on Rails** see <http://www.rubyonrails.org/>.)

Ravelry launched publicly in May 2007 at **Maryland Sheep and Wool** (<http://www.sheepandwool.org/>), a festival for sheep breeders and fiber artists. Shortly thereafter, in June 2007, Casey quit his day job, and both he and **Jess** devoted their attention to **Ravelry** full-time. They hired their first employee, **Mary-Heather Cogar**, in March 2008. Prior to joining **Ravelry**, **Cogar** was the Director of Operations for an International Human Resources consulting/management firm and a part-time knitwear designer.

The response to **Ravelry** by knitters and crocheters has been enthusiastic to say the least. Technically, **Ravelry** is still in beta testing, but you wouldn't know it from the number of registered users. There are over 230,000 people on **Ravelry** as of December 10, 2008. That is more than double the number of users in March 2008 (when **Ravelry** hit the 100,000 user mark), and the number of registered users goes up by almost a thousand each day.

A Personal Organization Tool

Ravelry is free to use, but you must have an invitation to become a registered user. (This limitation isn't to be exclusive, but instead to make sure that the back end of the site can keep up with the number of users and traffic on the front end.) Similar to other online communities like **Facebook** and **MySpace**, each registered user on **Ravelry** creates a profile, which includes basic information about the user's location, children, pets, and favorite curse word, as well as yarnie-type information, such as favorite colors and number of years knitting/crocheting. Users may upload pictures to their profiles, which are known on **Ravelry** as "Ravatars."

Ravelry makes it easy for users to integrate their own Web page or blog with their **Ravelry** profile. For example, **Figure 1** shows the profile of **Ravelry** user **SquidWidget**. A clickable image of **SquidWidget's** Website is on the righthand side of the screen, and recent posts from her blog are automatically added to her profile.

In addition to the basic profile, each user has a virtual notebook, which allows them to organize and manage their crocheting and knitting projects (past, present, and future); keep track of their books, patterns,

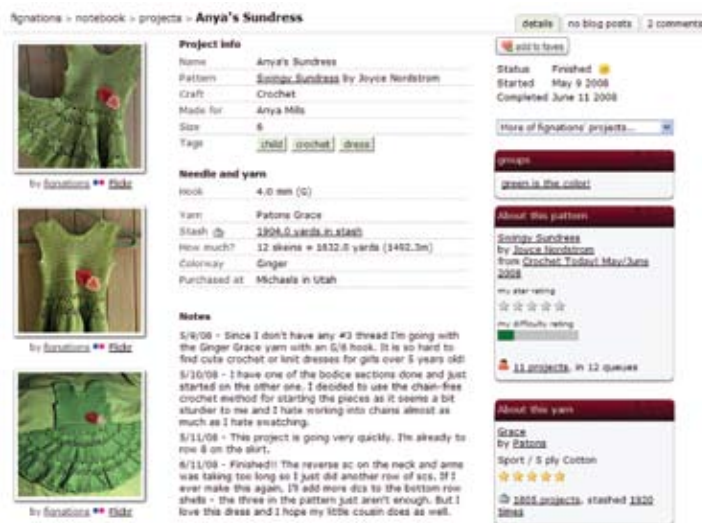


Figure 2. Project Page

hooks, needles, and yarns; and share all of this information with other **Ravelry** users. In the upper righthand corner of **SquidWidget's** profile are links to portions of her notebook: 52 projects, 477 stashed yarns, 51 queued projects, 24 books, etc. It is the content of the notebooks, rather than the user profiles, that provide the backbone of **Ravelry**.

For each project that users have completed or have in progress, they can create a project page. (**Figure 2** shows an image of a project page from **Ravelry** user **fignations**.) On these pages, users can upload pictures of their projects, rate the pattern and the yarn that they used, and include any special notes about changes they may have made or problems they ran into.

Most yarnies have a stash of yarn and supplies that they have collected. They may be saving it for a future project or bought it just because it was on sale and they liked the color or texture of the yarn. The Stash feature of the notebook gives users a place to organize their yarn stash and share information with other **Ravelry** users. Users can track the number of skeins/balls of yarn they have in their stash, what projects they have used that yarn for, and if they are willing to share, trade, or sell the yarn. Similar to the stash, the notebook also contains a library feature, where users can keep track of the knitting and crocheting books and patterns that they own.

Lauren Jensen, Public Services Librarian at the **Hewes Library** at **Monmouth College**, likens **Ravelry's** notebook to a content management system. "It takes all of the information needed for a project and puts it all in front of you. I use all of the features — in particular the Projects, Stash, and Queue. It lets me manage the supplies I need for a project, the project's status, and the project's that I want to work on next," says **Jensen**.

A Yarn, Pattern, and Project Database

In addition to the organization tools within the user notebooks, **Ravelry** functions as a database for both patterns and yarns. The search features are robust, allowing users to filter searches by factors such as the number of yards of yarn that are required or available, the weight and texture of the yarn, the type of garment being made, and a wide variety of other criteria.

Figure 3 demonstrates a search for a pattern for a pair of gloves. The list has been filtered to show gloves that have been categorized as crochet patterns requiring only one skein of yarn. From the results list, users can easily pull up a list of all the projects for a particular glove pattern. They can look at each user's project page to see pictures of the finished products, read reviews of the pattern, see the ways in which people have adapted or changed the pattern, and find out what yarns work best for the pattern.

The same holds true for yarns. Using the yarn search, users can see the various types of projects for which a particular yarn has been used, read reviews of the yarn, and, usually, find vendors from whom the yarn can be purchased.

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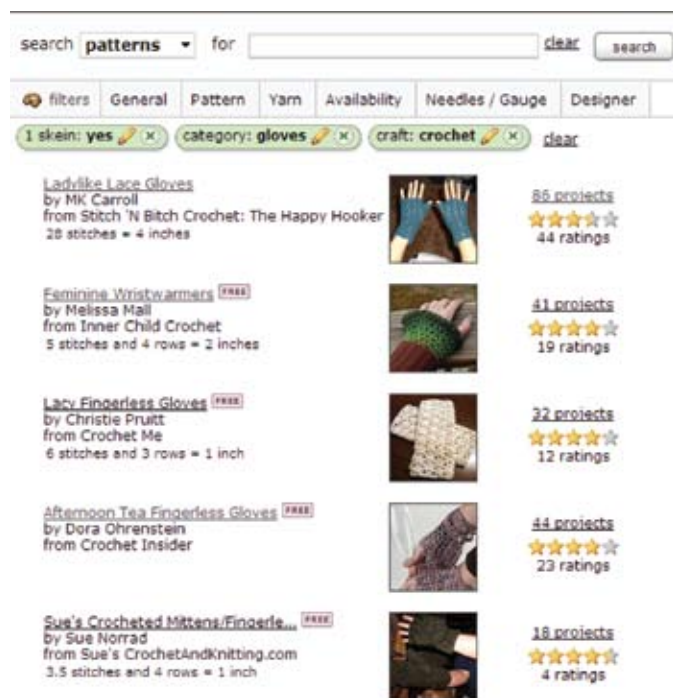


Figure 3. Pattern Search

Marijane White,
recent graduate of the
Graduate School of
Library and Inform-

ation Science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, finds this interlinking of patterns and yarns to finished projects to be one of the more useful functions of Ravelry. White points out that “before Ravelry, you had to visit a whole bunch of different sites to find patterns (Knitty, Knitting Pattern Central, etc.) and then if you wanted to find example projects that others had made, you had to comb through Flickr or blog posts to find them.” White went on to say, “One of the most remarkable things about Ravelry to me is how it brings diverse sources of information together into a really useful knowledge base.”

Sarah Roy, Public Services Librarian at Tennessee Wesleyan College, describes Ravelry as a bibliography/yarnography of patterns and yarns. Says Roy, “The pattern pages act like a citation count; some patterns have been ‘cited’ (made, photographed, modified) so often because they are reliable sources — well-written, highly useful, and, by now, considered classics.”

Roy goes on to express the opinion that the pattern and yarn searches in Ravelry serve as an example as to how databases and library catalogs should work. She explains:

A knitter (patron) says, “I need to find a pattern (article/book) for X item (topic) that is free online (free/on the shelf/full text in the database), and I can only use Y type of yarn (recent/peer reviewed materials).” The knitter finds a range of patterns targeted to their needs in one search box and two to three clicks, in a clearly laid-out results page, with pictures and notes to help them decide which objects suit their needs. The patron gets a mass of results sorted by the vendor’s idea of relevance, often without an abstract to help save time, in unattractive interface that can be difficult to navigate.

Honestly, the functionality of the search features within Ravelry make it worth checking out, even if you don’t knit or crochet.

An Online Community

Ravelry also has a vital and thriving online community component, facilitating communication between users in a number of ways. Each registered user has their own message box, through which they can contact any other registered user. There are also groups and forums, where people with common interests can congregate and talk with each other. You name it, and there is probably a group for it on Ravelry. If there isn’t a group for it, you can create your own. White finds this ability to create groups to be particularly important. “There were a good number of message boards and mailing lists out there before Ravelry, but none of them allowed their users to create their own sub-communities,” she says.

Librarians, for example, have their own special place on Ravelry, in the Ravelibrarians group (Figure 4). There, job announcements are posted, questions about library school programs are asked and answered, and librarians often consult with each other on professional issues. Just recently someone posted asking for ideas and assistance on cataloging a vintage knitting collection, and received feedback and suggestions about how to get started.

“Even if someone is not very active in terms of contributing to the discussion, there is still an incredible amount of information to read. It’s like having your own personal knitting staff available 24/7/365 to answer questions, make suggestions, or offer feedback,” says Jensen. In the case of the Ravelibrarians, Ravelry users consult not just on issues of knitting and crocheting, but on professional topics as well.

Prior to working for Ravelry, Cogar’s favorite features of Ravelry centered on her design portfolio and the way it allowed her connect with people who were knitting designs. Says Cogar, “It was pretty amazing, for me, to join back in May 2007 and see that other users had already knit my designs — I never would have known or seen the projects they made from my patterns if it wasn’t for Ravelry.” Cogar went on to say that “Ravelry allows such a great means for connection between designers and knitters/crocheters, or shop owners and their customers, is one of the most inspiring things about the site — it puts everyone around the world on a similar level and offers so many ways to communicate.”



Figure 4. Ravelibrarians Group

Not Your Average Social Networking Site

As an online community, one of the significant differences between Ravelry and social networking Websites like MySpace or Facebook is that on MySpace or Facebook users are primarily looking to make connections with people they know in their off-line lives, while on Ravelry users are primarily looking to connect with people with common interests, not people they already know.

Ravelry allows people who have a common interest (knitting, crocheting, and other fiber arts) to connect with each other and explore other common interests, whether it is librarianship, insects, or Buffy the Vampire Slayer. “I firmly believe that Ravelry is the 21st century answer to ‘bridge night’ or other social networking institutions of the last century,” says Ravelry user Elizabeth Trzebiatowski, a stay-at home mom in Stevens Point, Wisconsin. Trzebiatowski went on to explain, “People are busier in general than they were then, but Ravelry provides an outlet for people with similar interests (and subsets of interests, as evidenced by the massive number of individual groups devoted to wildly divergent topics) to gather and converse and share... Where else can so many people with a shared interest in, say, cephalopods and entrelac join together and chat about it?” [For the non-knitterly, entrelac is a particular knitting technique.]

Where else, indeed?

Acknowledgements

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mine for free materials. Doing Google searches for specific topics also reveals scores of wonderful databases which are free for the picking.

Our goal has always been to make it easy for readers to find the information they needed; and in the past we bought as many books and journals as possible to increase the chances that we had already acquired what they wanted before our students and faculty members entered the door. This is still the same but we now have Web resources to help us meet our goal. Because of the Web, we work more consortially than in the past. Collection Development in the print and digital ages has one more thing in common: You didn’t have enough money then, and you don’t have enough now!! 🌿