

iPod Touch Review: Wikpedia on your iPod Touch!

Wikipedia on the iPod TouchArguably, one of the greatest current contributions to the Internet is Wikipedia, a solid encyclopedic resource for general knowledge of topics spanning literally millions of articles. Though the accuracy of some of its articles is questionable, overall, Wikipedia does an excellent job of presenting generally reliable content. A point of note that any researcher, student, or general Internet user should know, is that because of its susceptibility to error and vandalism, Wikipedia, should not be used as a difinitive research resource, it should be considered a great starting point for researching a topic.)

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Like searching on Google, Wikipedia is fast and intuitive to use. On the iPod Touch, the Safari Web browser renders Wikipedia pages very well. But accessing Wikipedia from the iPod Touch has one major drawback: you must be online. Recently, however, there have been several sfforts to provide Wikipedia content in an offline format. This article covers two such offerings:

Wikipedia.app

Wiki2Touch (My Pick!)

I review what I like about them, what I dislike, and which I like best, so read on for a full review of these two applicationsâ?¦.

Generally speaking, offline Wikipedia implementaions require several components to work including a huge data file containing the text content of Wikipediaâ??s articles, some supporting files, and an application that handles the searching and displaying of the article content. Fortunately, getting Wikipediaâ??s data isnâ??t that difficult because Wikipedia makes this English languave data readily available in the form of a downloadable XML file. (If you require foreign versions, a number of foreign languages are available as well.) Currently, the data weighs in at about 3GB, so it may take a while to download the data. But downloading this 3GB+ file is just the start. You then need to convert the file into a format that the offline applications can manage. Fortunately, this is not a difficult processâ??time-consuming, but not difficult.

Wikipedia.app

The first application in this review is Wikipedia.app . This was the first offline implementation I tried, and it was simply amazing! It provided quick access to almost all Wikipedia text content. Entering search after search revealed just how much data could be packed onto an iPod Touch.

Unfortunately, Wikipedia.app is not without its issues as itâ??s not too hard to crash the application, particularly when following links from redirects. There are some simple workarounds, but this is still a drawback. The display is very simple, providing a nice scrollable display, but thatâ??s about it. There are no bells and whistles, so if you are looking for a small, lean application, this is it.

On the positive side, Wikipedia.app gave me my first taste of using Wiklipedia offline, and it provided adequate access to its articles. Searching was quick, and the display layout, while spartan, looked great. Many articles include internal links referencing other articles, so tapping any of the links displays that new article. Other than the occasional crash, it did work well.

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Another positive is in setup. Setting up Wikipedia.app was very straight forward. The first thing you need is the Wikipedia text data. Wikipedia.app provides a large pre-built data file that weighs in at just over 2GB in size. Itâ??s an English language snapshot of Wikipedia text content from October, 2007â??a few other lanugage versions are also available. Instructions are provided to manually build a more recent version, but the currently available version is fairly recent, so using the pre-built file makes isntallation much easier. You also need to download some supporting files and the Wikipedia.app application. Installation was as simple as downloading everything (which took a while because of the size), uploading everything to the iPod Touch, setting some file permissions, and restarting Springboard. It was very easy.

Once set up, you end up with a new icon on your Home page that launches a simple Search application. Enter your search text, and Wikipedia.app displays results in real-time as you type. This is great, because you get immediate feedback. Tapping any of the results will do wone of two things: Display the article, or display a redrect page. In most cases, tapping the redirect will either display the article, or display a new redirect. Occasionally, this crashes.

Here is the Wikipedia.app start page:
Wikipedia.app Start page

Here is the results page that displays results as you type:
Wikipedia.app Results Page

Here is an example of a rendered article:
Wikipedia.app Article Page

The articles display in a nice scrollable page with embeded internal links, and there is a button at the top to take you back to the search page. And at the top of the search page is a button to take upi back to the last-viewed article. There is no history, so if you follow internal links, going back will take you to the search page. And when you exit and relaunch the application, no history is saved.

Iâ??d love to see the Wikipedia.app program be stabilized and some features added, but for now, it works well enough. Features Iâ??d like to see added include saving search result history, retention of articles between sessions, and the ability to save â??favoriteâ?• articles for quick reference. Despite its quirks, itâ??s an excellent solution.

Wiki2Touch

Wiki2Touch takes a different approach in implementation. You still have a huge article data file, but instead of using a custom client application to search and display the articles, it includes a local Web server application that runs in the background, providing access to the local data directly from Safari. When you point Safari to the local Web server address, it displays a Wikipedia search page. Entering a search request searches the local Wikipedia data file and returns the article results in a nicely-formatted, iPod Touch-friendly page. Itâ??s quick and reliable, and if a result is not found or a link is broken, you simply get an â??Article not foundâ?• error pageâ??no crashes, no hassels.

Setup is not quite as easy as with Wikipedia.app because you must build the indexed data file yourself. While this may sound daunting, itâ??s actually very easyâ??it just takes lots of time. And one advantage to manually building the file is that you can build it using the latest snapshot ensuring that your data will be as current as Wikipedia provides. To build the file, you first have to download the 3GB+ XML data file from Wikipedia. Depending on the speed of yout Internet connection, this could take a while. Next, download the Wiki2Touch program distribution. Itâ??s a small package, so it will be a quick download. You then build the â??articles.binâ?• data file (the actual data file that will be uploaded to your iPod Touch) from the downloaded Wikipedia XML data using a simple â??indexerâ?• application. (For Windows users, the process is done by issuing a single DOS command.) The indexer.exe program converts and repackages the XML data into a format usable by the Wiki2Touch se
rver application.

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When indexer.exe completes, you upload the new data file and the application files to your iPod Touch (this can take a long time over WiFi) set some file permissions, restart Springboard, launch the Wiki2Touch app, start the server, launch Safari, then point Safari to http://127.0.0.1:8080/index.html. If everything went as expected, you should see a nice Wikipedia search page.

Using Safari to access the local Wikipedia data has several advantages over Wikipedia.app. Because articles are displayed through Safari, you use Safariâ??s User Interface features such as zooming and screen rotation to your advantage. This makes reading articles more consistent with reading other Web-based content. Second, if you enter s search request that does not find any results, or if a link or redirect happens to be bad, you simply get an â??Article not foundâ?• error instead of a potential crash. And because articles are returned by Wiki2Touch as a â??validâ?• URL within Safari, you can use Safariâ??s history, Bookmark, and Web Clip features to better manage and organize your searches and search results. (Oh, and get this: if you have the Wiki2Touch server running, and have WiFi turned on, PCâ??s on your local network can connect to your Wiki2Touch server via a Web Browser to your iPod Touch and submit queries! While this might potentially cause some security concerns, itâ??s still pretty cool.)

This is the â??startâ?• page:

Wiki2Touch Start page

This is an example of the real-time search page that displays search results as you type:
Wiki2Touch Search

This is the resullting article. Note that though there is no image displayed, it is formatted to accommodate images:

Wiki2Touch Article page

A potential drawback to Wiki2Touch is that overall, you will be using up to 50% more memory (3GB+ compared to 2GB+) than with Wikipedia.app. If you are using an 8GB iPod Touch and want to also carry lots of music and video with you, you may be out of luck. But for me, itâ??s not an issue, because Iâ??m using my iPod Touch more as a PDA than a media player. You just may need to make some choioces to prioritize what content gets loaded.

Conclusion

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So which do I recommend? They are both great implementations, but in the end, I have to recommend using Wiki2Touch. For a quick install and easy-to-use offline access, Wikipedia.app shines. Though itâ??s not without its quirks, and it occasionally crashes, it was simple to install, and it provided the content I was looking for. On the other hand, while Wiki2Touch required more up-front time to get things set up, once installed, it was so easy and stable to use. And the fact that it leverages Safariâ??s additional features makes it stand out as my offline Wikipedia search tool of choice.

In either case, once you get the taste of having Wikipedia articles accessible and available anywhere, any time, you begin to see just how exciting this really is. Being able to have pocketable, offline access to Wikipedia content alone, for me, justifies what I paid for my iPod Touch.

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