On This Wiki, Everyone's a Critic

Stanford's Lawrence Lessig, whose next book will be revised by visitors to a collaborative Web site, explains "user-supplied innovation".

In December, Stanford Law School Professor Lawrence Lessig announced on his blog that he would open up the revision of his book, *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace*, to public editing. On Mar. 16, he revealed that startup JotSpot's wiki, an editable Web page, will be the vehicle for people to participate in the revision process, the results of which will be published in print this fall.

In addition to his work at Stanford, Lessig, an outspoken critic of current copyright laws, chairs the Creative Commons project, a nonprofit organization that's helping forge new, more flexible copyright rules for the Digital Era. On Mar. 17, Creative Commons will announce a new license for wikis that basically reserves rights for the collective writers on a wiki rather than assigning them to any particular contributor. *BusinessWeek*'s Silicon Valley bureau chief, Robert D. Hof, caught up with Lessig to talk about how all this will work. There following are edited excerpts of that conversation:

Q: Some authors have elicited input from readers, but has anyone allowed people to edit and change copy so easily?
A: I've never seen somebody release their work in this way.

Q: Why did you decide to do a revision of the book this way?
A: I was eager to see if the ways they're extending wikis would improve the collaborative process.

Q: What do you think will happen?
A: Some parts of the book remain controversial, and they're likely to generate a lot of heat. That will be fun to watch, but it won't be all that useful.

But I hope for more outside views. I've found that people outside the academic environment can be very helpful and insightful. Eric von Hippel [professor and head of the Innovation and Entrepreneurship Group at the MIT Sloan School of Management] talks about user-supplied innovation. That's the insight I'm trying to exploit here.

Q: Why would people take the time to help on this, or on open-source software for that matter? Just because they're nice?
A: I'm not sure it's altruism. People just find it more fun to edit code than watch television. The architecture of the Internet makes this possible.

Q: What's the idea behind the new Creative Commons license for wikis?
A: It's almost like a GPL [General Public License, used in open-source software] for text. The copyright owner will be all the individual contributors. So if you want to use material on the wiki, you have to attribute it to the wiki, not to individual contributors.

Q: How will this work, then, for the new edition of your book?
A: The version on the wiki will be available to all forever. I won't be changing that version. Then I will do a standard, edited version, with a standard copyright license. I couldn't get Basic Books, the publisher, to agree to a Creative Commons license.

Q: Some folks have suggested this is just a way for you to get free help.
A: Anybody who thinks that hasn't edited a book. It's going to be a lot more work than just pulling together research assistants.
Q: So, do you think this will actually work?
A: Quite frankly, I think this is an experiment. My hope is to take advantage of the range of knowledge out there. If it turns out to be a bust, all I've lost is the royalties.