

Re: I was told that "I don't understand how Open Source works."

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Doug Laidlaw (*laidlaws@myaccess.com.au*) writes:

> *This was the context, with all identification removed to protect the*
> *innocent:*
>
> *I posted a problem to a forum on Sourceforge. The project maintainer*
> *ignored it and apparently didn't see 3 others. I asked him for an answer.*
> *He replied with the above quoted statement. To me, it implies that under*
> *the Open Source model, it isn't the maintainer who should contribute to*
> *marketing his product. He lets everybody else do it, then incorporates the*
> *answers in the next release. Who is interested in a project in which the*
> *maintainer isn't interested? (I notice that he is now answering some*
> *questions.) Proper support from somebody who knows the product is as vital*
> *under Open Source as anywhere else. I wonder if he has any connection with*
> *the commercial products he recommends? I wonder if his attitude to support*
> *is the same there? They are inaccessible to me here anyway, but he has put*
> *me off even thinking about it.*
>

I'd say you don't understand how open source works.

For instance, someone could cook up something to do some task they need done. He does not perceive some commercial market for it, and it's not worth his bother to try to sell the thing. But if he releases it as open source, if there's anyone who can benefit from the program, they will be able to make use of his work.

Or someone might say "that program almost does what I want, except...". Since it's open source, someone can see what the originator was doing, and use that source code to create what they need, without having to start from scratch. (Of course, if they release the program in some form, they also have to release the source code since they took advantage of the work of others.)

If you demand "support" from the program's author, making the program available to others may become a liability. SO those who can take advantage of the program without needing any hand holding

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would lose out.

I seem to recall that there are always or usually disclaimers in open source programs announcing that the author cannot be held responsible.

"Open source" is about not putting a condition on the source code. It doesn't require someone pay Big Bucks to see or use the source code, it doesn't require someone sign a non-disclosure agreement, it doesn't require that someone prove some ability in order to see the source code, and it doesn't limit who can see the source code to a select few.

It doesn't mean "I think you can use this source code" it means "I'll release this source code just in case someone can make use of it, even if I can't see any use for that at the moment". It also means that releasing the source code is easier for the author than not releasing it.

Some authors release software in the realm of "open source" for the same reasons that others would sell the software, ie to market a product. But others are simply helping others out, by releasing something they can get no value out of, or because they think others might benefit. But what is what depends on the software, and it depends on the author.

You seem to think a software writer is "taking advantage" of users if he doesn't help them, but does incorporate the work of others back into the program. But the author has given you and everyone else something, in releasing the program and in releasing the source code with it. It's hardly a parasitic move on the part of the software author, it's more like a symbiotic process between the author and the user. Note that with "open source", another person could come along and use the source code to create a nearly identical program, if they aren't happy with the support of the original author.

And I would argue, when it comes to documentation, that an author of a program isn't necessarily the best person to write the docs. Someone intimately involved in the creation of a piece of software may assume the user knows exactly what he knows, may forget tiny details that are like the back of his hand. They also may not be skilled in conveying a program to user. A third party coming in, and "open source" really helps that process, means an intermediary is conveying the essence of the program to the user. They have to learn it before they can use it, and in that process they convey what's needed to the new user.

Michael

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